

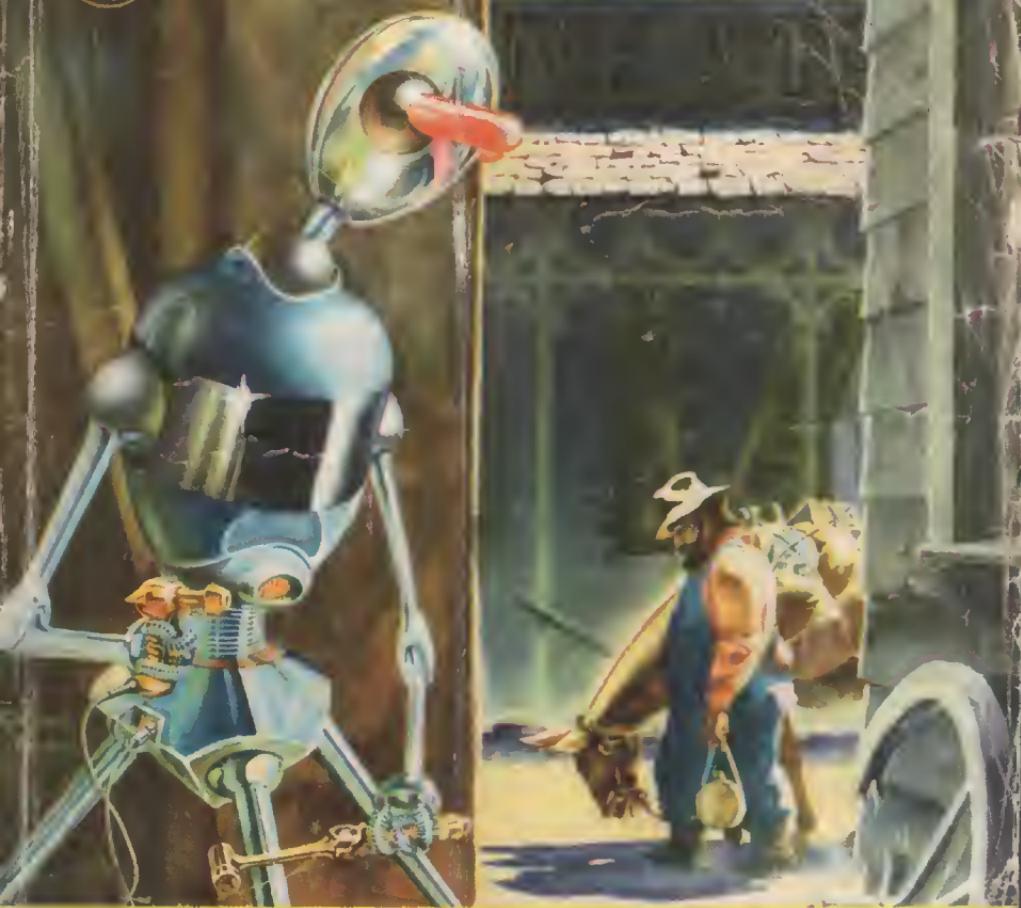
AMAZING

STORIES

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER



35¢



A GREAT NEW NOVELETTE BY WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

Kendall Foster Crossen • Henry Kuttner • Algis Budrys

to quote:

KEN CROSSEN



"I am 42, married and the father of four children. Born in Ohio, worked in steel mills, Fisher Body plants, carnivals, and for many years even tried insurance investigating. Switched to writing in 1939, the year I sold my first story. Since then, I've sold about 3 million words of fiction, acquired six pseudonyms in the process, and have two mysteries and two sf anthologies to my credit."

ROG PHILLIPS



"I was told so many things that were not so when I was little, e.g., the doctor bringing my younger sisters, Santa Claus bringing presents, if you plant birdseed it grows into birds, etc., that by the time I was eight I was thoroughly disenchanted. It wasn't till I reached full maturity at the age of nine, and made my first trip into outer space that I decided to become a writer, using my experiences for background material . . . Had enough?"

ALGIS BUDRYS



"Spent early part of my life in Prussia, where I was born in 1931. Came to this country five years later and attended various schools and colleges. Have always had something of the wanderlust, choosing varied spots like Florida, New York and Pennsylvania to live and work in. I indulge my fancy for science fiction by editing as well as writing it. More profitable, too."

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THE SENATOR AND THE ROBOT

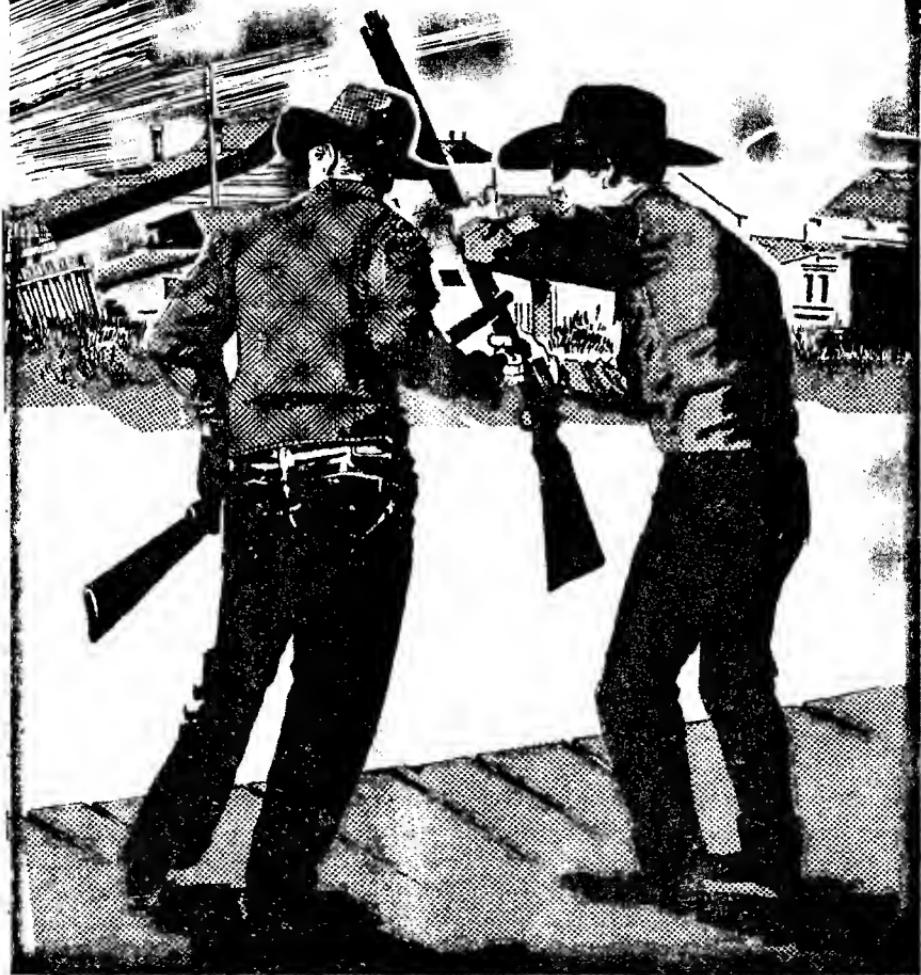
By IVAR JORGENSEN

THE robot stood in the long-unused street in front of what had once been the Palace Hotel and watched the miner come down from the hills. The robot was bright and shining—in sharp contrast to the sand-blasted, gutted buildings that made up the ghost town. It had three legs, and a telescopic eye that protruded

from its steel skull and was connected to a highly sensitized recorder.

This recorder translated the image of the miner and his donkey into — *A multiple, self-propelling unit consisting of two main sections: The foremost, a bipedal section draped in worn cloth molded loosely to the body. Second section — quad-*

*...here's a line that goes... we're taking you...
is for your own good'. Dictators use it quite often, and
the invaders from space were no exception. We didn't be-
lieve a word of it, but all we had to put against them were
three bewildered Intelligence men, a gal with very nice legs,
a small donkey, and a pompous politician. After the in-
vaders turned the donkey into a bed of roses, things
looked pretty bad for us. We still had the Senator of
course, but we'd been trying to lose him for years.*



Illustrator: Ernie Barth

ruped with large, loosely attached audio equipment. Second section wearing tightly fitting garment of short hair. Units connected by half-inch cable.

As a supplement to this description, the robot took an excellent photo of the miner and his donkey and sent both the photo and the description far off into space where they were duly received and noted.

As the miner came closer to the ghost town, the robot stood motionless in front of the old hotel awaiting instructions. These were flashed swiftly back through the ether, whereupon the robot turned on the photographic cell in its tubular, glowing eye, set the transmitter to *continuous*, and retired to the shelter of a narrow alleyway between two buildings.

The miner came slowly into the town; slowly, because one did not move very fast through a temperature of slightly more than one hundred degrees. As he walked, he carried on a desultory, one-sided conversation with his mule as men without human company are wont to do.

"We'll stop off and have us a leetle food and water in the shade of a building, Minny. Shade comes in mighty handy in weather like this. Then maybe we'll take us a leetle nap 'fore we move on to the west diggin's."

Minny did not explode with enthusiasm over the prospect, but neither did she object. She ambled

along with the neat mincing step of the pack donkey, her ears flopping in rhythm to her gait.

As the miner led his animal up the main street of the town, the robot's eye gleamed brighter—crimson—in comparison to its previous dull-rosy glow. It stood motionless as the duo passed its hiding place, then moved forward so that the tip of its red eye kept them under observation.

The miner chose the wall of the Chance Queen saloon as a shelter from the sun; then, incongruously enough, he built a fire. He fried bacon and ate his dinner, after which he and Minny shared some water from one of the canvas bags in her pack. Then he lay down for his nap.

A few minutes later, the robot left its hiding place and came up the street on remarkably silent legs. As it approached the prone man, the donkey stamped a lazy foot and looked on in mild interest. The robot bent over the miner and the red eye glowed even brighter. It moved in a slow circle around him, apparently peering at him from as many angles as possible.

Then it straightened up and returned to its hiding place.

An hour later, the miner opened his eyes and within a few minutes he and the mule were trailing off toward the foothills in the direction opposite from whence they had come. The robot watched

them go, then something clicked in its metal dome and the eye dimmed down to a rosy glow.

It took the miner a good two hours to reach the rough country flanking the salt flat beside which the ghost town was located. But once there, he knew exactly where he wanted to go. To a stone-walled pocket where a campsite was protected on three sides.

Once there, he peeled the thick beard from his face, rubbed his jaws vigorously with both hands, and sighed with relief. He said, "Damn! That's good," then went forthwith into a pup tent where he sat down in front of a high-powered radio set and began twisting the dials. Soon, the donkey — if at all interested — could have heard the man's sharp, clear voice going into a microphone and out along a closely guarded short wave channel:

"No invitation, but I wondered how the party was going, so I took a trip down to the hacienda. No dancing. Everybody gone but the butler —"

And so on for half an hour.

In an office deep in the Pentagon, a blond young man picked up his 'phone and said, "Nick Kendall speaking." During the next three minutes, he was transformed from a tolerably cheerful person to a haggard individual with a hunted look. Finally he got a few words in: "Now wait a minute."

Then, a little later, in sheer desperation: "But for God's sake! Can't somebody else satisfy him? Can't you block him off somewhere down the line? Give us a break up here, will you? We aren't nursemaids to lame-brained —"

Evidently his protests got him nowhere, because he finally said, "Okay — send him up, but give me five minutes to shoot myself." As he hung up, his intercom buzzed. He threw the switch and emitted a lifeless, "Yeah?"

The voice that came back over the system was bubbling with triumph. "Big stuff, boss! Franky came through. A report and a picture! I'll bring 'em in!"

"Do that," Nick Kendall said without any great enthusiasm.

A few moments later a slim, dark man in his middle twenties entered the office carrying some papers and wearing a puzzled look. He said, "Maybe you didn't understand me. I said we've got it! Franky came through."

"That's fine. The report decoded?"

"Of course."

"Read it."

Still puzzled, the dark young man scanned one of the sheets he was carrying. *"They attempted no contact but I took a chance and went down into the ghost town. The place was deserted except for the robot. Minny and I had lunch and I tried luring the robot within camera range by lying down for a nap. It*

worked. Got a good shot with micro-cam while it was bending over me. Film out by pigeon to the Kingsford office. You should have it now. Where the hell do we go from here?"

"And here's the photo," John Mitchell said. "A big leg up, eh?"

Scowling, Nick Kendall picked up the 8x10 glossy and studied it. "It's their exploratory robot," he said.

"You're damned right it is! Franky shot it against the sky — lying on his back. A beautiful photo."

"Uhhuh."

"For crisake, Nick! What the hell's wrong with you? This is big stuff. What gives?"

Kendall shrugged. "Why so big? It only proves what we've suspected all along. Frankly, I'd say it makes the situation worse. Up to now we could have been dead wrong." He flipped the photo across the desk. "This seals up our last exit."

Joe Mitchell dropped into a chair and shook his head in bewilderment. "Nick — this isn't you. Give it to me. What's happened? I can take it. I'm of age."

"Okay — brace yourself. I just got kicked in the belly. There's a politician in our fair land, name of Senator Benjamin McCambridge."

"Uh-huh. Known affectionately by the Washington ~~wank~~ and file as Blow Hard Ben — Lard Head McCambridge —" Joe Mitchell

did a mild double take. "Wait a minute! He's senator from —"

"That's right. From the same state our extraterrestrials have put their greedy little eyes on and put their cute little robot down in."

"Okay — what about Big Mouth Ben?"

"He's blowing his top — hair piece and all. He heard rumors of what's afoot and he started asking questions. He was shunted off by expert shunters, but he kept hitting left of tackle until he broke all their bones and now he's on the way up here. Our buffers have all collapsed."

"Tell him to go to hell," Joe flared.

Nick Kendall looked with marked pity upon his second in command. "Would you like the job of telling a United States Senator where you think he belongs; or would you rather take a knife and slice your own throat without mess and bother?"

Nick subsided glumly. "On second thought, I'll take the knife."

"You are indeed wise."

Joe Mitchell's mouth had assumed a sullen downward twist, oddly reminiscent of a small boy frustrated in some small desire. "Okay," he said. "That cooks it. I know a couple of very nice chicks I've been saving for a rainy day. I'll arrange contact and we'll smother our sorrow tonight in a pair of lovely bosoms. That's all

that's left." Joe Mitchell grinned.

"Maybe — maybe not. But speaking of chicks —" Nick leaned forward and snapped the intercom. There was an answering click from somewhere out beyond and he said, "Send Margaret Heart in." A mousy voice said, "Yes sir," and Nick sank back in his chair.

Joe Mitchell drooled mentally and said, "Maggie Heart. There's a dish. You know I can't get within ten feet of —"

"Get your mind above your belt, Joe," Nick Kendall snapped. "If you weren't a boy wonder with languages and dialects I'd —"

Maggie Heart must have been very close, because she entered at that moment. "You called for me, Nick?"

The intercom buzzed again and Nick snapped it open. "Sit down, Maggie. No time for briefing. Just follow along." Then, more impersonally, "Yes?"

"Senator McCambridge, Mr. Kendall."

Nick sighed audibly. "Send him in."

There were a few scant moments of silence. Joe Mitchell spent them with his eyes and mind on Maggie Heart. When the flash of guilt came, he met it head-on. What the hell! He'd done his job. And after today it was pretty sure to be a short life, so why not make it a happy one?

And when Joe thought of girls,

he was a very happy man.

Then a cyclone named Benjamin McCambridge thundered into the room and all hell itself stood poised for flight.

The Senator glowered and said, "This place is —?" His pause was a not-too-subtle demand for information.

Nick Kendall got up from his chair using a smile for a mask. "The Office of Intelligence — Division of Public Welfare. I'm Nicholas Kendall — Director. This is Margaret Heart — psychologist. And Joseph Mitchell — linguist. Sit down, Senator."

Sacré bleu! Joe Mitchell thought. *A windbag with an inferiority complex as big as his pot,* Maggie Heart diagnosed.

They both smiled.

Senator McCambridge snorted and looked about him like a bad-tempered bull. "You're all three mighty damn young! What is this? A government by children?"

"We're products of the times, Senator," Nick retorted, meaning to say absolutely nothing and succeeding. "What can I do for you?"

The word for the Senator, as he dropped into a chair, was belligerence. "They tell me this is the top of the ladder."

"If I get what you mean, the answer is yes," Nick replied.

"All right. I've been shunted around from the Potomac to breakfast. Now I want some facts."

"I'll help in whatever way I'm able."

"You damn right you will. I've heard on good authority—" The Senator took a deep breath. "—one, that the government knows a lot more about the flying saucers than they're telling the people. Two — it's known definitely that the saucers contain extraterrestrial beings who plan to take over our world. Three — that this invasion from outer space is pin-pointed smack on the state I have the honor to represent in the Congress of the United States —"

McCambridge — red in the face now — stopped for breath while Maggie Heart prayed silently, Please, Senator — *I just had lunch and I wouldn't want to spoil this rug.* And Joe Mitchell recalled a funny he'd seen printed over a bar: *Y R THER MOR ORZE-ZAZZEZ —*

Nick Kendall pried his teeth apart, silently cursed the "good authority," and said, "There is more truth in what you've heard than we like to admit, Senator."

"Then why this criminal censorship? There's going to be an investigation, and I warn you — some heads will fall!"

"Senator —"

"Shut up! I've only begun to talk. Why hasn't something been done? Why hasn't a ring of steel been thrown around the area in question? Why hasn't the atom

bomb been used? Why haven't we taken the initiative?"

Nick Kendall's eyes blazed. "Look here! All you can get is my job and be damned to you! So there's a limit to what I'll take!"

The Senator's head jerked. His jaw flopped down. He hauled it up again and blinked. "Now wait a minute, young man!"

Nick Kendall was reviling himself for the weakness of anger. "I want to be reasonable, Senator —"

"And I'm a reasonable man. My worst enemy couldn't call me otherwise!"

"Of course. So let me give you our side of it."

"That's all I've been asking for. Get to it!"

"Very well. The facts are these. We've suspected for some time that the saucers were from outer space. Today we got proof." Nick handed the photograph of the robot to the Senator, and went on. "That is an authentic picture of a robot that was put down in the south-central desert of your state about a week ago. It was taken by one of our agents yesterday."

"Three legs," McCambridge observed blankly.

"Yes, three legs. Our previous efforts — I won't bore you with details — gives us proof of only these facts: The saucers contain intelligent creatures from outer space. And they are hovering over the western United States. Upon these two pillars, we must con-

struct a structure of pure theory."

"I'm listening."

"On the face of it, we must assume that these beings possess a technology far superior to our own. In short, we must assume that we are at their mercy."

"Why must we assume that?"

"Because they are obviously smarter than we are. They have not chosen to contact us though we've given them the opportunity. Therefore we have no way of knowing whether they are friendly or hostile. With no knowledge of these creatures or their motivations, we feel it would be foolish to antagonize them by a show of belligerence. If the die is cast in that direction—if there is no alternative—we will of course alert the world and put up whatever defense we can." Nick managed a smile. "Perhaps we were remiss in not acquainting you with the facts, but now that you have them, don't you agree that it would be foolish to possibly panic the nation with the meager knowledge we have? And also extremely ill-advised to display open antagonism without further data?"

The Senator was trapped into a nod of agreement. He tempered it, however, with a scowl and a question. "Then what in Tophet are we going to do? We've certainly got to do something!"

"Of course. We are going to try to make contact with them."

Nick had finally decided the Senator could not be blamed for his sneer. It was built in—as permanently as the look of perpetual distrust in his eyes. This warmed Nick to the man—a little bit, anyway. "That's about all we can do. Maggie and Joe and I are heading west tonight. We will travel as a party on the hunt for uranium. Amateur miners so to speak."

"Why the masquerade?"

Nick frowned, hesitated, then said, "Because a general pattern of some sort must be maintained. We can hardly go out into the desert and stand there in our underwear—"

"I'll have no impudence, young man!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I meant that we've got to proceed as we would against an enemy of our own intelligence level. Even though we are certain these creatures are on a much higher plane."

There was silence while the Senator pondered.

Peeking out from behind a respectful look, Joe Mitchell studied the bulging contour of the McCambridge jaw. Then his eyes roamed down to Maggie's legs and stayed there.

"I'm going with you," McCambridge said suddenly.

"We may all be killed, Senator," Nick Kendall said.

"Be that as it may, I owe it to my constituents to be on the

scene. We've had enough of this hush-hush stuff. The people of the great state of —"

"Very well," Nick snapped. "We leave tomorrow morning. Can you be ready?"

"I'll be ready." The Senator spoke with a belligerence that dared anyone to say he wouldn't.

Maggie studied the solon thoughtfully. *As a senator, I must respect you. But as a man, I can see through you like a window, you overgrown slob in a Brooks Brothers special. You don't believe a word of all this. Your weird and wonderful mind refuses to accept it. You think the robot was built by General Electric. You think it's all a great big publicity stunt and you're not going to miss an inch of it. Bless you, Senator, and may your fat run off in rivers.*

"I think the Senator is very brave and public-spirited," Maggie said demurely.

The sun had dropped behind the mountains now and the blistering heat had abated. Senator McCambridge shivered, growled, and said, "This accursed desert! You either freeze or fry!"

He and Nick Kendall were seated at an open-air table over the remains of supper. To the south lay the great salt flat, shimmering in the dusk. On its nearer edge, the ghost town was a dark blot some two miles away.

Nick Kendall forebore any an-

swer to McCambridge's complaint and the latter seemed to resent it.

McCambridge growled, "why the hell doesn't something happen? We just putter around this hell-hole — putting on an act —"

"Something did happen. Frank's donkey disappeared."

The Senator bristled. "I'll take no impudence, young man. If you're trying to be smart, you'd best remember —"

A certain weariness came into Nick's voice. "I'm not trying to be smart — and certainly not impudent. You complained that nothing had happened and I'm telling you that the donkey is gone."

"I was referring to something important. What does it matter if a donkey wanders off?"

"It didn't wander off. It was removed — stolen — spirited away while Frank was asleep. As you say — it may not be important. But I'd still like to know who swiped the beast."

McCambridge squinted suspiciously at the younger man. "Why haven't I met this Frank? Are you hiding him?"

"Of course not. I merely felt it was smarter to keep him out on his own — clear of our party. If the worst happens, he may be able to reach his sending set."

"He's come to see you though?"

"Late at night, when you were asleep."

"What are you doing — keep-

ing me from talking to him?"

"Not at all," Nick said with some weariness. "I didn't think you'd want to be awakened from a sound sleep."

"I hope he measures up better than the rest of your personnel."

"You mean Maggie and Joe? What's wrong with them?"

"Mitchell is a scatterbrain if I ever saw one. And that Maggie Heart. Well, her main qualifications seem to be a fine pair of legs. Was she brought along to keep young Mitchell from being bored?"

Nick held his temper. "You only see the obvious, Senator. Ed may be somewhat immature but he happens to be a genius in his line."

And what's that? Following women around?"

"Languages. If anyone living can converse with these extraterrestrials, it's Joe Mitchell."

McCambridge's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Mitchell — Edward Mitchell. Say — didn't I see a report once —?"

"And Maggie," Nick went on, hurriedly, "don't let her good looks fool you. She's older than she appears to be — in her early thirties and she's a psychology whizz kid. She could save our lives."

McCambridge scowled into the fast deepening night. "Mitchell — Mitchell —" He snapped his fat fingers. "I remember. Some sort of sex charge." The Senator's harsh gaze was tempered by a grim

smile. Good solid grist for the investigation mill, this. He said, "What's going on around here, Kendall. I want the facts!"

Nick sighed. "That was Joe's brother. And he wasn't in government employ. The case was incorporated in an overall report."

This saddened McCambridge. He retreated, but refused to be completely routed. "Lax, Kendall. Grossly lax. Strains like that can run in a family — can haunt the blood."

"Not necessarily," Ken replied. He managed to cover his apprehension, however. An apprehension born of a feeling that — in this case — the taint *did* encompass both brothers. And springing also from a feeling of personal guilt. Joe Mitchell was the greatest in his line. His services were invaluable. Nick Kendall could not deny that he'd stretched a point or two in Joe's favor.

Senator McCambridge evidently tired of the subject. He turned his gaze toward the now-invisible ghost town. "Why doesn't something happen, Kendall? We've been here two days now. Are you sure that — that robot creature is really down there?"

"No. We're only sure it *was* there."

"Then why don't we go down there — why don't you send somebody down there to find out?"

"It seems a useless risk. Whether

it's there or not at the moment doesn't affect the situation any. We can only wait."

"Kendall," the Senator said sharply. "Tell me—and tell me the truth. Is all this on the level? Or is it just an act to make a nice report for the Appropriations Committee later on?"

"I give you my solemn word, Senator. It's very much on the level."

"And we could be blasted into eternity any second?"

"Yes, but I don't think they'd do it that way."

"Why not?"

"Because that wouldn't fit an intelligent pattern — at least I don't think it would. I'm more inclined to believe that if they're going to kill us, they'd do it in a different way."

"How?"

"As an act of research, possibly. Suppose they got curious as to how we're made. They might take us apart and lay the pieces out on a table for classification."

There was the brushing of footsteps and Maggie stood beside the table. She wore pastel shaded blouse and shorts, colorless in the gloom, lighter than the gleam of her bronzed legs.

"Is it necessary to go around nude?" McCambridge growled. "You know we have a sex mani—"

"It fits the overall pattern, Senator," Nick said, sharply. "We're attempting to look au-

thentic. A party of natives searching for ore."

"If these creatures are so all-fired intelligent, why do we bother?"

"Maybe you've got something there." A touch of weariness was apparent in Nick's words. He glanced up at the girl. "I'd think you'd be chilly, Maggie."

"Not chilly. Worried."

"What's the trouble?"

"How long since you've seen Joe?"

"Three or four hours. He had a headache and didn't want any supper. I thought he was in his tent."

"He left camp well before sundown. I've been looking for him. I can't find him."

To Senator McCambridge, everything had a name. "Kidnapped!" he said. "They've taken him."

Nick Kendall got up from his chair. "Not necessarily. The tent was very hot. He may have gone off trying to find a cooler place. We'll have another look around. He may have dropped off to sleep somewhere. You go to bed, Senator. Maggie and I will have a look around."

The Senator did not comply. He sat drumming the table with his fingers, watching the two yellow spots from his companion's flashlights move off across the desert floor. He sat for possibly five minutes reassembling his

thoughts. Perhaps there was something to this saucer scare after all. If so, his chances for future publicity were enhanced immeasurably. Also his chances of a quick death. Would it be better to pull out and go home?

He was pondering the wisdom of this when a voice addressed him from the darkness. "Senator, will you please step this way?"

It was an oddly mechanical voice. Each word was perfectly enunciated. The voice was utterly toneless. "Senator, will you please step this way?" Exactly the kind of a voice one would imagine as coming from a lamp post, if one could imagine such a thing.

Senator McCambridge got up and walked into the darkness.

Beyond earshot of the camp, Maggie laid her hand on Nick's arm. She said, "I'm scared, Nick. I'm really scared now."

"We'll find him."

"Not Joe. It's something I found out in the ridges while I was looking for him. Come. I'll show you."

A five-minute walk brought them to a ragged rock spur at the edge of the salt flat. "In there," Maggie said. "There's another salt pocket."

"I smell flowers."

"Wait 'til you see them."

She led him through the jagged lava and the smell of flowers heightened. Then Maggie flashed

her light just ahead and Nick gasped at the sudden riot of color that stood revealed.

"Frank's donkey," Maggie whispered.

"What are you talking about?"

The flower bed was rectangular — roughly five feet by three. The blossoms were huge things of every imaginable hue. The perfume was heady. Nick dropped to his knees, held one of the blooms in his palm and trained his flashlight on it. "Good God! I've never seen anything like this before!"

"Of course not. No flowers like these were ever grown on Earth."

"What were you saying about Frank's donkey?"

"Look." With the tip of her shoe, Maggie pushed several small objects together. Nick bent down to inspect them. "Donkey's hoofs!"

"Exactly. There are also fragments of bone — and hair. Don't you see what happened — what this proves?"

Nick rubbed a hand across his face. "It's been thrown at me pretty suddenly. I — "

"Well I've had some time to think, Nick, and this is an example of horticultural alchemy beyond our wildest imaginings. I'm sure that those creatures tested our soil for productivity, using their own methods. They needed living matter and so they

took the donkey. Look here—" Maggie thrust her hand down into the bed and brought up a mound of soft, dark soil. "Don't you see what they've done?— This is new earth. In less than forty-eight hours, they've transformed that animal's cells and sinews into— *dirt!*"

Nick ran his fingers through the soil. "I guess we'll have to assume that you're right."

"Of course I'm right! And it makes me a little sick. They happened to use the donkey. What if they'd used one of us?"

Nick's short laugh was calculated to comfort her. "Not so fast. We still have no proof that they're contemptuous of human life."

"No? How did they know but what the donkey was human?"

"You're forgetting something. When the robot came close to Frank in the ghost town, it waited until it thought Frank was asleep. The donkey was still awake. Therefore they knew the animal was inferior to us."

"I hope you're right. But I wish I knew where Joe is."

"You go back to camp and hit the sack. All this has been hard on you. I'll circle around and see if I can locate him."

Maggie passed a weary hand over her face. "I think I'll take you up on that."

"I'd better walk back with

you first. It's a black night."

"What's the use. If they come after us it doesn't matter where we are. There's no protection from them."

"I guess you're right. I'll see you back at camp."

The camp was dark and silent when Maggie got back. She walked along just behind the bright spot of flashlight. She had the feeling of a person walking in a sea of smothering darkness— struggling to reach the safety of a tiny sun and never quite making it. She found her tent, slipped inside and dropped to her cot with a sigh of relief. An odd nervous reaction set in. She found herself breathing irregularly though her physical effort had been scant.

This is absurd, she thought. Take yourself in hand. You're acting like a ten-year-old.

She steadied herself, sternly. She removed her blouse and dropped her shorts, kicking them off her ankles and slipping off her sandals. Shivering slightly, she turned toward her cot.

"Hello Maggie."

Instinctively, she snatched up the blanket and covered herself. "Joe! What are you doing in here?"

"Waiting for you angel."

"Get out! Get out immediately. I'll call the Senator!"

"The Senator isn't here."

"That's absurd. He's asleep in his tent."

"The Senator isn't here, angel. I checked." There was a thickness, a lack of control in Joe Mitchell's voice that shot fear through Maggie. Then her training and education came to the fore. She folded the blanket around herself and sat down. "Then he must have gone for a walk," she said quietly. "What happened to you? We thought you were lost. Nick is out hunting for you now."

"Let him hunt. The exercise will do him good."

"Were you hiding in here all the time?"

"It doesn't matter where I was. I'm here now—and you're here. And we're alone."

Joe Mitchell had changed; and even though Maggie—a psychologist and a woman—knew why, it still revolted her. I mustn't lose my head, she told herself. He's out of his mind and he has to be handled. An approach suggested itself and she said, "Joe, in a way I'm glad you're here. I'm frightened. I'm afraid none of us will come out of this alive." Desperately, she hoped to arouse his protective instinct.

Joe laughed—a choked, unnatural sound. He was on the cot beside her. He said, "Who cares, baby. A short life and a happy one. Let's not waste time."

Maggie knew she had failed.

Another instinct—not the protective—had Joe Mitchell by the throat. "Please, Joe!"

"Baby—let's be sensible. Do you think you were given those legs and that shape to waste? They were made to be used, angel. All this morality rot is so much conversation. Nature gave us appetites to be satisfied. Let's get going."

She waited, tense, for the touch of his hands. "Joe—don't do anything you'll be sorry for!"

"Cut it out! You're no school girl. Do you think you can walk around half naked and not expect something to happen?"

Joe anticipated her scream and cut it off with a quick hand over her mouth. "Baby," he said, in a thick whisper. "This is it. You might as well relax. I wouldn't want to hurt you."

The blanket was gone. Maggie was facing lust coupled with superior strength and all her education in the ways of humans was of no avail. Here was a practical demonstration of the way of a human not able to practice restraint. Maggie went down on the cot—forced backward—turned—bent. . . .

"Joe Mitchell. Will you please step this way?"

The voice was expressionless, mechanical and was somehow more than a voice. A command sheathed in a power not identifi-

able nor definable. Yet power there was — in the darkness of the tent — in the air around them. Power to damp out the fire in a man's blood and the will from his mind.

Joe Mitchell lifted his hands from the body of Maggie Heart and raised himself from the cot. He stood for a moment — frozen — like a person staring into infinity.

Then he walked out of the tent into the night.

Maggie Heart huddled in the blanket on her cot. She tried to control the muscular and nervous reaction in her body; tried to concentrate through the weird singing in her ears. It was as though a giant bow, was being pulled across a thousand strings in one mighty discord; as if every muscle in her body responded to a different string and was trying to tear away from her bones.

By force of will, Maggie pushed her mouth into a grim semblance of a smile — then managed a laugh that was little more than a croaking sound. "This is certainly no time for a girl to be caught naked." She spoke the words aloud as though creating the sound as something to cling to, however tenuous.

She got off the cot and clawed around the floor of the tent after her shorts. She found the blouse first and put it on with quick jerky movements.

The singing in her ears increased and she went to her knees, now, sobbing in an oddly mournful, animal-like manner as she hunted for the rest of her clothing. She found the shorts, raised one leg to put them on and found she could not keep from falling. I'm helpless, she thought; helpless. Utterly in the power of whatever force or entity that is playing tricks on my mind and body.

With dogged determination, she sat carefully upon the edge of the cot and raised one leg. She pulled her garment carefully over it, then over the other leg. She stood up and finished clothing herself. The buttons caused trouble because her fingers were numb. While she worked with them, a sudden reaction set in. This came as a picture, entirely unbidden, entered her mind. She giggled. The giggle rose into a full-blown laugh. Can't button them, she said to herself. Numb fingers. Not sure they're buttoned. Never can be sure. Walk out of the tent. Outraged. Very dignified. Head thrown back. Imperious. Then my pants fall down.

Hysterical laughter. Funny — so very very funny.

Maggie dropped to the edge of the cot. She put her face in her hands and sobbed.

The ringing stopped. At last Maggie realized, quite suddenly, that it was gone. Her nerves steadied. The muscle twitch sub-

sided. She drew a deep breath.

Then a machine-like, chillingly impersonal voice called. "Maggie Heart. If you are ready, will you please step this way?"

Of course, Maggie thought. Of course I will. You have but to ask. While, far back in her brain a question glowed like a far-away beacon.

In God's name — what is happening to me?

But it didn't matter really. Maggie walked out of the tent and saw the robot.

Nick Kendall's face was drawn and haggard. He paced back and forth in front of his tent, one fist punching rhythmically into an open palm. Frank Carney wearing his heavy beard and old prospector's get-up, sat against the tent wall, nursing his knees.

Gloom and tension were the order of the day.

"All three of them gone," Nick muttered. "Gone like flames blown out in the wind."

"I'd say we're pretty helpless," Frank grunted.

"If we could only see them in daylight! If we could only get some idea of what we're up against!"

"I don't think daylight or darkness has anything to do with it." The whiskers seemed to interfere with free speech. Frank scowled and pushed them away from his lips.

"Take the damned things off. We aren't fooling anybody."

"Thanks. What a relief." He peeled off the beard and threw it to the ground. I think that ship could come down at high noon and we still wouldn't see it."

"How so? How could they blanket it?"

"They could blanket us. They've got power, man! — power!"

"Then why are they playing with us like mice in a trap?"

Frank Carney studied the other through narrowed blue eyes. "I don't know anything about that, Nick, but I do know we've got to get some of this pressure off."

"How?"

"You've parked here doing nothing. That hasn't been easy. Let's make a move of some kind. Let's take a couple of Brownings and go looking for that robot. Sit here long enough and you'll blow a valve."

"The basic order was 'no hostile moves', Frank."

"Uh-huh. So we squat here until all of us fade into thin air and then Washington sends somebody out to drive the jeep back. Big deal!"

Nick stared — pondering — off across the blazing salt flat. After a few moments, Frank Carney added: "Either that or send a full report and get new orders. What's holding you back on sending a report, Nick?"

"Because I know how their minds work back there. I know exactly what their orders would be: 'Make every effort to locate absent member of party in surrounding country'. The sane assumption is that they fell ill from amnesia or something and wandered away."

"We know that's silly."

"But they don't. Then too, there's the Senator's reputation. The scandal columnists would tie McCambridge and Maggie up together. The old boy would be washed up."

"I've got a hunch he's washed up already."

"Could be."

Frank sighed. "So we sit here waiting to evaporate."

Nick turned away abruptly. He walked into his tent and bent over an unlocked case beside his cot. "Come and get 'em," he called.

Frank entered the tent and Nick handed him a Browning automatic rifle.

"How about a couple of grenades?"

They quitted the camp armed to the teeth and walked swiftly toward the ghost town. Already, Nick Kendall's tension seemed to have lessened.

"Suppose we meet that three-legged tin woodman out of Oz? Do we blast away?"

"Let's try to talk to it?"

"We'll ask it if it plays bridge."

"If things look dangerous, we'll turn tail and run like hell — try and get far enough away to throw a grenade. I've got a hunch about that thing."

"What hunch?"

"That the thing's a walking bomb. It stands to reason they wouldn't want it to fall into our hands. The logical safeguard against that would be a self-destruction unit."

"Okay — I'll follow your lead."

They walked along the edge of the salt flat, their feet breaking the crust. "Nice place to test a racing car," Frank said.

"Not big enough."

They were hardly aware of the statement or the reply as they marched along — their eyes trained on the tumbling town. Rising heat waves made it twist and shimmer. Entering the outskirts and moving up the main street, they found themselves walking on tiptoe, their throats tense, their knuckles white from gripping the guns.

"Looks deserted."

"When I got the picture, the damned thing came from between those two buildings."

They reached the far end of the street, turned to retrace their steps. Halfway back, a glint of light caught Nick's eye. He spoke quietly. "There it is — beside the hotel."

They both turned slowly and

faced the robot. It stood unmoving, except for the tubular eye that angled slowly about in a slow, weird, eccentric pattern.

"What do we do now?" Frank whispered. "Blast the thing?"

"Hold it!"

The robot stepped from the shelter of the tilting wall and came toward them. They waited. Twenty feet away, the robot stopped. A tinny, mechanical voice said, "Please don't use your weapons. They would be of no value."

"It talks!" Frank breathed in wonder.

The reply came instantly. "No. This mechanism is merely a transmitter of visible and audible waves. It is also capable of destroying you, so please do not make that necessary."

"Where are you?" Nick asked. "Where are you speaking from?"

"We are some ninety miles above you. Out in space. We control the robot from here."

"Certain members of our party have disappeared. Do you —?"

"We have them. We are carrying on some experiments."

"Then your intent is hostile. You come as enemies."

There was a pause of almost thirty seconds before the three-legged transmitter spoke again. "A question. Assuming that — how would you proceed?"

"We would resist, of course."

"Thank you. We feel your

level of education and awareness is so low as to make further conversation a waste of time. Return to your camp if you are so inclined. We have no need of you at present."

"And suppose we are not so inclined?"

The answer came in action rather than words. The robot raised one arm. In the clutching mechanism at the end of it was a small, tube-like object. The robot pointed this at the sagging wall of a building close at hand. There was a sudden sound; a sound filled with the agony of tortured molecules in the process of swift and violent change. The wall disappeared — was transformed into a heat blast that singed the hair from the faces of the two men. They sprang backward and cringed away from it. There was the rumble of unsupported beams and timbers tumbling to the ground; then a cloud of lazy dust rising into the sky.

"We suggest you return to your camp — if you are so inclined."

"I guess we're inclined," Frank muttered.

They went back as they had come, crunching along the edge of the salt sea. The sun, lowering toward the hills, seemed to pour out as much heat as midday. Halfway back to camp, Frank turned to look toward the ghost

town. The robot was still there. "They ought to move their boy to the sidewalk," Frank growled. "He'll get run down in traffic."

Nick gave no sign that he heard. "We've got to make a full report," he said. "There's nothing else we can do."

"Uh-huh. Bring out the jets. Start firing the rocket interceptors. We should knock them down easy. They're only ninety miles up."

Nick suddenly grasped his arm. "You see what I see?"

"Huh? Where?"

"In camp. Someone's sitting at the table."

Frank rubbed the sweat from his eyes and peered ahead. "You're right. it's — it's Maggie."

They began running. The distance lessened. Now they were close enough to see the girl clearly. She sat with her elbows and forearms resting on the table, her hands folded. She stared straight ahead, not even turning to look at them as they came into the camp.

"Maggie — Maggie! Are you all right?"

She moved her head around very slowly, but her expression did not vary; a vacant expression. She could have been in complete control of herself or in an advanced stage of shock. "I'm quite all right," she said.

"Where did they take you?"

"When did you get back?"

"I'm not quite sure about either answer. I think I've been here quite a while. I was probably on their ship — I'm not sure."

"Do you want anything, Maggie? A drink. Something to eat?"

She brushed away the offers with a shake of her head. "They have power, Nick. They have great power."

"Do you feel like talking about it?"

"I'm feeling better now. My head is clearing. The daze I've been in is a little hard to explain, but this is what it boils down to: I have no doubt seen them and their ship, but I have no recollection of what they looked like. I'm quite sure that I remember what they want me to remember — that I've completely forgotten what they do not wish us to know."

"How did they capture you?"

"I was called out of my tent and I saw the robot standing there. I felt duty-bound to go with him. I went. Now I'm back. And I've been changed. I've been changed a great deal."

The two men glanced at one another, waited.

"They've eliminated certain faults in my character that would keep me from being a docile animal. Now I will fit into any slot they want me to. I could give milk for their children — shine their shoes — if they wear shoes

— work on a production line in a factory."

"Maggie — I don't understand," Nick said. Then, "Wait — you need rest. Hit the sack now, and we'll talk later."

"No, I'm quite all right. I was sent back for a reason — to tell you how it's going to be so you can report to Washington."

"Okay — if you want to talk."

"They did me no damage. In fact they helped me — improved my character. You see, all resistance in a people to a just ruler and overlord springs from character flaws in individuals. If the flaws are eliminated there is no resistance."

Frank leaned forward and laid a hand on her arm. "Listen, honey. You aren't making it very clear. Why not start from the beginning?"

"This is a test expedition. If our planet is right in all respects, they'll take it over. They won't be cruel; no more so than a dairyman is cruel to a herd of cattle. It's to his advantage to be kind. So if all conditions are right — and it appears that they are —" Maggie looked up quickly. "What were you saying?"

"I said — why not start at the beginning?"

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry." She glanced upward, a slight frown on her face. "Joe and the Senator should be back shortly.

The three of us were test cases. But they have such power. It's so very easy for them to straighten us out. We're so far beneath them."

"Honey — please."

Maggie smiled at Frank. "From the beginning? I'm not quite sure where the beginning is. I suppose it's when I got there — wherever they took me. I have a vague recollection that they were tall and that they looked like we do, but that may have been an illusion they projected into my mind. Anyhow, I'm supposed to tell you this: They've made many tests on this planet and it's ideal in practically all respects. The soil — the climate — the location. There are other planets too. In fact this is a little like a contest. They feel we should deem it an honor to be accepted as a productive colony. No more worries for us. All our problems eliminated by superior minds."

Maggie looked at Nick with just a shade of anxiety in her face. "If you turned the animals out of a zoo, they'd be lost, you know. We solve their problems — feed them — give them good homes."

"Maggie, honey — what in God's name!"

"These people are as high above us as we are above the animals we capture and cage."

"What are they doing to Joe and the Senator?"

"Just what they did to me.

You see if our planet is to be used, all things must be right. If we had to stand over our animals night and day with guns and whips, it wouldn't be worth while. We'd leave them in the jungles. But we have ways of taming our animals and they have ways of taming — us." Her eyes pleaded for understanding. "Don't you see? They used the three of us as specimens. They're eliminating the flaws from our personalities so that we'll conform perfectly."

Both Nick and Frank looked at Maggie and sickened inside. It wasn't necessary that she repeat — *they have great power*. Frank said, "We'll fight. By God —"

"Frank! What chance has a cow — or a monkey — or a tiger, if we want them?"

There was a moment of silence before Maggie said, "But we won't mind. After a while we'll be grateful."

"*After a while* —"

The sun had set but none of them noticed the deep dusk until footsteps startled them and Joe Mitchell was standing by the table. Oddly enough, they greeted him in complete silence. He was anticlimax; he was aftermath. There was nothing to be said.

Nor did he appear to think it odd. He ignored the men completely. His eyes and his attention were upon Maggie. He went straight to her and stood with

the air of a criminal about to receive sentence. He asked, "Can you forgive me? Can you ever do anything but hate me?"

"It's all right, Joe," she said.

"No, it isn't all right. If I could only understand. If it made the least bit of sense. How can a man in his right mind act that way toward a woman? How can he violate every essence of decency ingrained in his being? How can he —?"

"It's all right Joe. Over and done with."

"I must have gone momentarily mad. That's the only answer. Such an act can't possibly be rationalized."

"It could never happen again?"

"Never. I'm certain of that, but if I could only understand how —"

"Why don't you go to bed, Joe? You're tired."

"Yes. I'm tired. I'll see you in the morning."

Nick and Frank had sat mute during the conversation. Joe had gone into his tent before Nick spoke. "What was he talking about?"

"Before they balanced out his personality, he attacked — he tried to attack me. That's all gone though. He'll have no further urge for excesses."

Frank scowled, looked in the direction of Joe's tent. Half rising from her chair Maggie said, "All of their tests have been positive

We were the last. They'll move quickly — very quickly. Oh, Nick!"

Suddenly she was off her chair and in Nick's arms. "We're helpless! We're doomed!" Sobs wracked her shoulders and her words came between them: "At least we'll have one thing left. Even animals can be sad. We'll still be able to cry!"

Nick held her tight, hunting for words. But he never found them. A rumbling base voice accompanied by heavy footsteps came from the darkness. "What in hell's name is this? Why don't you turn on some lights?"

As though released by a switch, Frank went to the supply box after lamps and the table was brightly lighted when Senator McCambridge strode into view. "What sort of laxness is this? Where is dinner? Must a man go forever without food?"

"Senator!" Frank said, "They let you go? They —?"

"Let me go? They escorted me down from their damn ship mighty damn quick when I told them what they were up against. Blasted upstarts! When they started their shenanigans in that stupid laboratory I gave them twenty minutes — just twenty minutes — to put me back on American soil! They didn't have much hankering for a fleet of jets blasting their funny looking saucers out of the sky!"

Maggie was trembling in Nick's arms. "They — they went away?"

"They certainly did. When they found out who they were fooling with, they picked up their stupid looking robot and hit for home. They found out pretty quick that I'd stand for none of that kind of foolishness. I told them they were dealing with the United States of America! The strongest and greatest nation in the history of the world!"

Maggie's nails were digging into Nick's chest. Her lips were close to his ear. She spoke in a whisper. "Of course! Oh Nick! Of course they've gone. They refuse to rule with a club. We had to conform and — and the Senator just didn't. The test was negative."

"What on earth is this?" The Senator roared. "Shameless love making on a government expedition? If you think I won't report exactly what's gone on here —"

Maggie turned from Nick and moved close to the Senator. She put her arms around his neck and pressed close to him. He would have had to be a pillar of salt not to react. He scowled down at her and — waited.

"Senator," Maggie said. You're an old doll! I'm in love with you and I don't care what you report. I'm going to give you one big kiss and then make you the best supper you ever ate.

McCambridge let her do both.



DREAM OF VICTORY

By ALGIS BUDRYS

We'd like for you to meet Stac Fuoss. Handsome guy, wouldn't you say? Tall, good build, not tough but quite capable. A little on the cynical side, we'll admit, but how can you be filled with the milk of human kindness if you're not human?

No, we don't mean he's a robot. Robots are metal, coated wires and cybernatic brains. Stac bleeds when he's cut, staggers after his eighth martini, loses his temper if he's pushed. But what is much worse: his mind is like yours and mine. That enables him to dream . . . and dreams can be fatal when you're an android!

PART I

FUOSS cracked his knuckles and pushed the empty glass across the bar. He took a pull on his cigarette, driving the smoke into his lungs as hard as he could. He exhaled a doughnut-shaped cloud that broke against the bartender's stomach.

"Want another one, Mister?"

the bartender asked.

Fuoss bit down hard, enjoying the pressure on his teeth. "I'll take one."

The bartender picked up the glass. "I don't think she's coming in tonight."

"Who?"

"Carol. It's a little late for her to be in."

"Carol who?"

"You kidding, Mister?"

Fuoss pushed the stub of his cigarette into an ashtray, took out another one and waited for it to light. "I never knew a Carol in my life. You trying to sell me on a friend named Carol?"

"You know how many of these you've had, Mister?" The bartender held the glass up.

Fuoss bit down again. "You keeping tab?"

"Sure I am. I was just wondering if you knew." The bartender poured a finger of lemon juice into his mixer. "You're an android, aren't you?"

"What's that got to do with it?" Fuoss cracked his knuckles in the opposite direction.

The bartender added syrup and gin. "Carol's human. Grew up on the block. I remember the first time she came in here, with this look on her face daring me to say she wasn't old enough." The bartender, who was a bulky man, was apparently used to having globules of sweat tremble on his forehead. "Carol's human," he repeated, without raising his glance from the mixer.

Fuoss's stool clattered on the floor.

The bartender looked up. The door shut loudly. The bartender ducked under the bar and ran to the door. He looked through the glass but couldn't see anything, so he opened the door and stuck his head outside. A sound of footsteps

came from down the street, but the street lamp in front of the bar cut off his vision.

The bartender quirked his mouth up at the corners and dilated his nostrils. He went back inside the bar, set the stool up, and drank the Martini himself.

In sleep, the conscious mind — that cohabitant collection of misdirected clockwork — is quiescent, and the dramatic subconscious is free of its restraints.

Seven-thirty.

Fuoss's day began. Usually, the shift from subconscious back to conscious thought was so precise that he was able to believe that he never dreamt, but this morning the fatigue of the previous day's unusually hard work held him on the borderline.

Seven-thirty, then, in the clock's modulated voice, and Fuoss let the end of a snore trickle out of his nostrils, closed his mouth, and scratched a buttock, but was not yet completely awake.

Seven-thirty and a half. Recall the length and complexity of the dream that comes between the first alarm and the subsequent feel of the bedside carpeting under your feet as you gather your pajama bottom back up to your waist. Mohammed knocked a glass from a table, bent, caught it, and lived a lifetime in the interval.

Fuoss pushed the clock's cutoff and walked to the bathroom,

skirting his wife's bed. He shaved and showered, walking back into the bedroom with his pajamas over his arm. He went to the night table between the twin beds, picked up a cigarette, then sat down on his bed instead of taking fresh underwear out of the bureau and dressing.

"Stac?"

His wife had awakened. She turned her head and looked at him, raising a hand to brush the hair out of her eyes. "You're not getting dressed. What's the matter?"

Fuoss widened his eyes and relaxed them, trying to come fully awake. "I don't know," he said. "I had this dream just before I woke, and I'll be damned if I can remember it. Guess I just sat down for a minute, trying to remember it."

"Is that all?" Lisa smiled. "Why let a dream bother you?" She stretched her arms at her sides, bending them upward at the elbows. "Kiss me good morning."

Fuoss smiled, threw the cigarette into an ashtray, and bent over the bed. "Does sound silly, doesn't it? Can't get the idea out of my head that it's important, though."

Lisa raised her lips. Her swollen eyes and mouth were crusted at the corners. Fuoss kissed her absently.

"Stac! What in the devil's the

matter with you this morning?"

Fuoss shook his head. "I don't know. It's that damned dream. I haven't felt right since I woke up. Can't pin it down."

Lisa frowned. "Whatever it was, I don't like it. From the way you kissed me, you'd think it was about another woman."

Fuoss felt a jab of guilt. He got up from Lisa's bed and walked over to the bureau. The taste of Lisa's unwashed mouth was on his lips, and he yanked at the top drawer.

"If I knew I wouldn't be bothered about it, would I?" He dressed rapidly. "Do I have to kiss you like Don Juan every morning?" He went to the night table and picked up his watch and keys. "Haven't got time for breakfast, now. I hope Brownfield's wife finally had her kid, so Tom can get back to the office. I'm getting sick of doing his work overtime without getting paid for it."

Lisa made an impatient sound, got up and walked toward the bathroom. She slept naked. Fuoss watched her.

"Arms and legs," he said. "Two of each, perfectly molded, attached with correct smoothness, and equally smoothly articulated and muscled. Breasts and hips — also two of each — and superbly useless for anything but play. All this equipment joined to a sculptured torso, and the entire work

of the designer's art surmounted by a face with just enough deliberate irregularities to make it appealing."

Lisa turned, a half-frightened look on her face. "What did you say?"

Fuoss smiled with restrained bitterness. "That was just Culture S, Table C Fuoss reading specification on Culture L, Table S ditto. My wife, by the grace of Section IV, Paragraph 12 of the Humanoids Act of 1973, and the General Aniline Company, Humanoids Division. Good morning, Mrs. Mannikin —"

Whatever it was that had been fermenting in him suddenly came to a head. "Why the hell don't you buy a hairnet?" he said, and slammed the bedroom door behind him.

Fuoss stepped out of the Up chute into the office a few minutes before nine. He went to his desk and sat down, staring at the In basket which the file clerks had already filled with folders and correspondence. He ran a thumb along the edge of a batch of files.

Blue Tabs. McMillin. First Brownfield's stuff and now McMillin's, too. There wasn't anything wrong with Mac's wife. Why should he be doing part of his stuff?

He wiped his forearm over his eyes. He'd tried to explain this morning's outburst to himself dur-

ing the drive to the office. It couldn't be the dream. He was tired. Work had been piling up on his desk during the past month, and he'd had to do overtime. Brownfield had been out lately, with his wife's pregnancy developing complications at term. That meant more work to be done. More reading, more dictation, more interviews. His nerves were strained.

He remembered some of the other jobs he'd worked at. Doing rewrites for the *Times*, for instance. He'd liked it, been good at it. He'd saved enough from that so the extra money he'd picked up free-lancing had paid for the destruction and replacement of the unmatured remainder of Lisa's culture. At that time, the thought of being married to a true individual had seemed important.

After the newspaper business got a little tight, he'd tried his hand at managing a chain store, and when that petered out he'd done any number of other things, until he'd finally landed this insurance claim adjusting job. Come to think of it, he'd held a lot of jobs.

Guess I'm the restless type, he decided.

"... and thank you for your kind cooperation," he dictated an hour later. "Rush that out, will you, Ruthie?"

He looked up from the file and

saw Brownfield come in.

"Thank God!" he said. Brownfield was carrying a box of cigars and wearing the smile of a new father. "Look who's here."

"Why, it's Mr. Brownfield! He called this morning and said he might be in," the stenographer said.

But they figured I might as well do his work anyway, huh? Fuoss thought. "What's the news on his wife?" he asked.

"Oh, she's fine. They had a baby boy." Ruth smiled envi-

ously.

Brownfield came across the office to his desk. Fuoss got up. "Well, hell, Tom, congratulations!" he said, slapping Brownfield on the back. "Boy, huh? Bet he looks like his mother. Most boys do, I hear."

"Little early to tell yet, Stac," Brownfield said happily. "Might be, though. He's got blue eyes like Marion."

"Well, all babies have blue eyes at first," Fuoss said. The thought struck him that young Brownfield probably resembled nothing so much as he did a slightly boiled marmoset.

"All babies do?" Brownfield said. "I didn't know that. How come you did?"

Meaning 'What does an android know about children,' huh? You smug son of a bitch. "Don't know. Must have read it somewhere, I guess," he said.

"Guess so. Have a cigar?"

"Thanks. Say, these are good."

"Nothing but the best for the first-born, I always say."

Fuoss hid a grimace. "What're you going to call him, Tom — Junior?" he asked unnecessarily.

"What else? Have to carry on the family names, you know."

In a pig's left nostril, I know!

Brownfield looked over his desk. "Looks like all my work's been done for me while I was gone. You do it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, boy, I owe you a drink, don't I? What say we drop in some place after work? I sure appreciate you doing this for me."

Why not?

"Sure. I'll see you at five."

"Sure thing." Brownfield walked away, the open box of cigars in his hand.

Fuoss threw the cigar into the back of his desk drawer and picked up another file.

Carol had short, dusty-black hair. Her blue eyes were wide. They were accented by sweeping brows and outlined by coal-black lashes. Her nose was short, flat, turned up at the end. Her lips were small and thin. They twisted nervously whenever she forgot to control them. Her face was round, sun-tanned, and slightly flat.

Fuoss waved at the waitress and silently pointed to the three empty glasses. The girl put the

glasses on her tray and moved off.

Brownfield shifted awkwardly in his chair. "I've got to go home, Stac," he said petulantly. "It's getting late. I've got to call the hospital and talk to my wife."

Fuoss looked at him from under his lowered eyebrows, his eyes a dark mud color. "You can call her from here."

"I'm hungry, too. I've got to go home and eat."

"You can order a sandwich here, you know." Fuoss took a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and held it out to Carol.

"Light it for me, will you?" she said.

Fuoss grinned. He put the two cigarettes in his mouth until they lit, and handed one over. "Tommie boy, here, gave me a cigar today," he said. "Good cigar. Too bad I hate cigars." He turned to Brownfield, smiling. "Don't get me wrong, Tommie. You're a hell of a good joe. I just don't like cigars." He leaned across the table and laid his hand on Carol's arm.

"Tommie sure did me a big favor today," he said emphatically. "He brought me in here, didn't he? Introduced me to one of the really nicest people I ever met. Even if I don't like cigars. Was that Tommie's fault? Good cigar. Did his best." He laughed. "Sure did his best. Mr. Brownfield has fathered a son. Ever hear of a better best than that?"

Carol shook her head. "Never

did. That's really something."

Brownfield pushed his chair back. "I've got to go."

Fuoss narrowed his eyes and stared at him. He looked at Carol with a sidewise swing of his eyes and then looked back at Brownfield. "All right. If I was you I'd be celebrating the blessed event, but I guess you know what you're doing. Thanks for the drink. And thanks for introducing me to Carol. Goodbye."

Brownfield grinned uncomfortably and raised his hand awkwardly. "I'll see you." He turned his awkward smile in Carol's direction. "I'll see you, too."

"Won't wifey mind?" Carol answered, puffing on the cigarette. "It's been fun and all that, but you're a proud papa now."

Brownfield put his hand on the back of his chair and opened his mouth, but closed it again and then said something else instead. "Yeah. I guess so. I — I'll see you." He turned and walked out.

Carol broke into a laugh. "Ever see an expression like that on anybody's face before?"

Fuoss guffawed. "Not once. Never." The waitress had brought three fresh drinks, and he picked up Brownfield's. "Brownie's a good guy, though. Never thought a bird like him knew about a place like this. Damnedest thing."

"The place isn't really much. It's too quiet, usually. I like it to

rest up in until the bigger places open."

Fuoss looked around and nodded. "Yeah, come to think of it, you're right. The place would be dead if I hadn't run into you. I guess it's the company that gives any place its atmosphere."

He finished Brownfield's drink and started on his own. "Damnedest thing, us just walking in here and finding you."

Carol smiled. "Oh, I'm usually in here. It's awfully dull, usually."

Fuoss nodded. "Come to think of it," he said abruptly, "Brownie was right. It is time to eat. You hungry?"

Carol nodded, wrinkling her nose. "Uh-huh."

"Okay. Order something. You know the food in here. Order for both of us."

"Oh, the food stinks in this place. Tell you what . . ." Carol smiled, dimpling sweetly. "Why don't we go up to my place? I'll cook something up for us and we can go out someplace later. How's that?"

Fuoss's eyes glittered. "Sounds good," he said, and waved to the waitress for their check.

There was no point to going all the way back to the carport to pick up Fuoss's Buick, so they took a cab to Carol's apartment. Fuoss helped her out of the cab and held her coat while she unlocked the door.



She opened the door and swayed against him. "Whew! I didn't know I was that high," she murmured. She laughed, a low chuckling laugh and leaned forward.

"'S all right," Fuoss said. "'S all right. We'll be okay when we get some food down."

"Sure we will," Carol said, and laughed again. "Mix yourself a drink while I go find the kitchen."

Fuoss was recording impressions on his senses. There were a lot of them. They wheeled by; sight, hearing, smell, taste, feel, all reeling by. He had no means of slowing them down or cutting them off, so he simply recorded, letting them run into his mental tape recorder, not analyzing, not examining, just letting them spin, stopping once in a while to drive his fingernails into his forearm when the fog became too pervasive.

Slap! His head recoiled. *Slap!* Other direction. He was leaning against the flexible bathroom wall, facing the mirror. He slapped himself again. And again, trying to drive some of the fuzz out from around his senses. The air was tight, squeezing against him from all directions, compressing.

There was just too much of it. Too much going on, going by. He opened his eyes and the spinning stopped. No, not quite. But it did slow down considerably.

Carol's arm was around his

neck. "Hi," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Hi." He pouted a smile in return.

"I don't think we're going out after supper." She giggled.

"Why not?"

"It's two o'clock in the morning and we haven't had supper yet."

Fuoss looked down at a coffee table covered with bottles. Most of them had been sampled. "Well, let's eat, then." He was having real trouble focussing his eyes.

Carol put her other arm around his neck. "In a minute, honey. Let's have one more drink. We haven't tried the Cherry Heering yet." She nuzzled his ear.

Fuoss stifled a belch. "All right."

Just before morning he had the dream again.

He thrashed out in the night, twisting the sheet around his legs and bringing a sleepy protest from Carol. He kicked, but the sheet held. He was soaking in sweat.

He had no clear image of the woman. She remained disembodied. Discarnate, but woman incarnate. He knew only that she was human, and this knowledge brought him a sense of triumph, of victory. He was victorious, glorious.

She came from blackness, and it was into blackness that he went for her.

He rolled and jerked on the bed. Time whinnied by like a silver beast.

The woman was gone, hidden in blackness. His feet moved spasmodically against the sheets.

The blackness parted and the woman returned. There was with her —

His subconscious recoiled. He cried out.

"Stac!"

The infant turned from his mother's breast and stretched out his hands. "Father!"

"Wake up, Stac! Goddamn it, *wake up!*" Carol pounded his shoulder. "Wake up, will you, for Christ's sake! You're bawling like a baby."

Fuoss opened his eyes and looked up into the darkness. He reached out for Woman.

Fuoss stayed behind a pillar, out of sight of the hundreds of arriving commuters, until his car was driven down the ramp. Then he scrambled inside and drove out of the exit as rapidly as possible. He swung into the Uptown lane and relaxed for the first time since stepping out of the cab at the carport.

A dose of B-1 had calmed his stomach, but his head was still feverish. His hands had a tendency to shake. When he paid his toll at the bridge, he almost dropped the coin. He drove jerkily, tramping down on the accelerator and

letting up too fast on the brake.

Despite this, there was a smile of satisfaction on his face.

Lisa met him at the door. "Tal's here," she said.

"The old family legal advisor, huh? Going to get a divorce before you even hear my side of the story?" Fuoss twisted his mouth.

Lisa smiled coldly. "If you're going to go tom-cattin', I can't stop you, but at least get the purr out of your voice when you come back. Tal called up early this morning — wanted to see you. When I told him you weren't in, he came over to wait for you."

"Uh-huh. The office call?"

"Yes. I had to tell them you were sick. I don't think they believed me."

Fuoss grinned sourly. "Not with Brownie running around telling them what a bad boy I've been." He shrugged. "Tal in the living room? I'll go in and talk to him."

He brushed his lips across Lisa's cheek. "Fix me some breakfast, will you, honey?"

Tal Cummins, like most androids, was the next thing to a chain smoker. He opened a gold case as Fuoss came in and threw him a cigarette without asking. "How are you, Stac?"

Fuoss sat down opposite him. "Fair. What's up?"

Cummins waited until his cigarette had a good light. His black

hair had fashionable grey strands in it. His face was lean and aristocratic. His manner matched them. He had bought the hair and face to replace the ordinary undistinguished android features, but the manner had taken a number of years to cultivate. Only with another android did he fail to rise, murmur a greeting, and offer his cigarette case with polite urbanity. "How's your job coming along?" he finally asked.

"Hell of a question, after two years."

Cummins tapped his cigarette and watched the ash drift into a tray. "Doing a lot of overtime lately, are you?"

"Sure."

"Getting paid for it?"

"Supper money. Executives don't draw overtime — you know that."

Cummins snorted. "Ever hear of the Junior Executives Union? Don't tell me — the answer's no. It's a part of the dead and glorious Prewar past. The companies beat it by putting everybody from file clerks on up on the private payroll. Bingo, they were ineligible for unionization."

"And I'm that kind of an executive, huh?"

"You're in good company." Cummins let some more ash fall. "How about the other fellows in your office? They do a lot of extra work?"

"Not much. I sort of take care

of about everything around here."

"I'll bet you do. How's your production record? Handle more cases than anybody else in the office, don't you? Even without the extra work, I mean."

"Sure. It's pretty easy work."

"Getting steady raises, are you?"

"Well — times are a little rough in the insurance game. They promised me one pretty soon, though." Fuoss ran a hand through his hair. "What's all this getting at?"

Cummins doused his cigarette. "Did it ever strike you that you were being put upon, old chum? Don't you think it's kind of funny that a guy with your ability has held so many jobs?"

Fuoss grunted. "Maybe. I was thinking about it yesterday, as a matter of fact." Tal Cummins is a hell of a nice guy, but I'd like him better if he didn't talk in circles. He shifted his feet.

Cummins smiled thinly. "I'll get to the point in a minute."

"Mind reader?" Fuoss growled.

"Lawyer." Cummins let himself smile for a minute more, wasted a little time on a new cigarette, then leaned forward. "Stac, I'll bet you anything you'd care to risk that you'll lose your job within the month."

"Why?"

"May I acquaint you with a little history?"

"If it's got anything to do with me. But cut it short."

"History is never short, my

boy." Cummins kicked the end of his cigarette with his thumbnail. "History is extremely complicated, and we—" he gestured from Fuoss to himself, and included Lisa with a wave toward the kitchen, "are one of the prize complications.

"You've heard of the war. You have also heard of the extreme devastation and depopulation. I've done more than that. I've gone through books that describe a complicated civilization from its most revealing angle — its legal structure. I've also studied the 1960 census, and compared it with the emergency figures compiled in '68. Being an android, specializing in the cases covered by the Humanoids Act, I've also built up a better-than-average picture of what shape the humans were in when they finally dropped in their tracks in '67."

The sophisticated mask fell away. "Things were rugged, Stac. Seventy-five per cent of the civilized population was dead. Their technology was either completely wrecked or useless, because some fragment which remained operative depended on another part which hadn't. The humans were headed for the most colossal dark age since the Western Roman Empire collapsed.

"We were the answer. They took their soldier androids, did an extensive revamping and improv-

ing, and here we are. Or rather, there we were, because things are different now." The faintest trace of bitterness found an unaccustomed home on the bland features.

"Anyway," he went on, "what they needed in a hurry was a labor force. Not just a bunch of quasi-robots, but intelligent individuals, or near-individuals, who could handle anything a human could. The result was not only android pick-and-shovelers, but android technicians, android scientists, and android teachers. Even —" he smiled — "android lawyers."

"They did a good job. For all practical purposes, androids are duplicates of humanity. The main difference, of course, lies in the fact that androids cannot reproduce themselves by natural means. There, the humans knew they had a problem. If we were comparatively unintelligent, it wouldn't matter too much. But they gave us brains — and the potential for a nasty bundle of neuroses. They gave us android wives to take some of the sting off, but nobody's ever figured out a way to give us a substitute for parenthood. Adoption, unfortunately, is not the answer for the genuine article."

Fuoss looked at Cummins through a screening cloud of cigarette smoke. The lawyer was a smart cookie. Was he smart enough to be hinting around?

"But that's beside the point,"

Cummins said.

Fuoss relaxed.

"*That* problem is going to be solved as a by-product solution to a much larger problem," the lawyer continued. "In a way, your working overtime is a symptom of that same problem."

"How?"

"Look around you," Cummins said simply. "Any traces of the war left? Any poverty, hardship, devastation? You don't use matches on your cigarettes, you drive a two-hundred mph Buick with an automatic pilot, you never used an elevator in your life, and your alarm clock's been on voice for the last ten years. You, friend, are living in the technology of the late Twentieth Century. The fact that it's fifty years late is unimportant. Another thing — *this* civilization is truly world-wide. There are no 'backward' areas — the day of the ignorant savage gaping before the white man's magic is over."

"We did a good job," Fuoss said.

Cummins laughed, with no trace of humor. "Exactly. We worked ourselves right out of it."

"Now — wait a minute! You don't mean they're going to stop making androids."

"They have stopped."

"What! When? How come nobody knows about it?"

"Relax, Stac." Cummins waved him back into his chair. "There's

nothing we can do about it. You'd be surprised how many people have tried." He smiled inscrutably. "I'm one of them, as a matter of fact. But there's more to worry about than that."

"Such as?"

"What's happening to you — and me. Haven't you figured it out yet? The human population's back up to normal. Nobody needs androids any more. They don't want to come right out and say so, and in many cases the humans themselves aren't deliberate in their actions. It's simply a question of an employer hiring humans rather than androids. After all, if you were a human employer, and two applicants, one human and the other android, showed up for the same job, which would you hire?"

"So I'm being eased out of my job?" Fuoss searched his pockets for a cigarette.

"Shows all the signs, doesn't it? Looks to me like they're trying to disgust you into resigning. They might also pick on some pretext — like you being out all night on a bat."

"That was a celebration with Tom Brownfield! He was with me!"

"All night?"

"All right — we split up about eight! So what?"

Cummins made another one of his soothing gestures. "Relax, boy. I'm not accusing you of selling

anybody into slavery. I'm just saying your company might decide it was a beautiful opportunity. Insurance companies are pretty stuffy outfits, anyway, you know."

That was what Cummins said, but Fuoss could see the shrewd light in the lawyer's eyes. He'd let a little too much slip about last night. Worst of all, he'd protested too much. Well, there was nothing he could do about it now.

"So there won't be any more androids, huh?" Fuoss said.

"Correct. One of the obscurer subsections of the Humanoids Act covers the case. But why worry? One thing we androids have over the humans is a complete lack of interest in the succeeding generation."

"Don't be so Goddamned smug about it!"

Cummins raised his eyebrows. "Did I touch a sore spot?"

"Never mind what you touched. You've been spreading a lot of stuff around here this morning. I'm not ready to believe all of it. I particularly don't care about you prying into my married and personal life. Got me?"

Cummins got up, the urbane barrister once more. "Well, it seems I share Cassandra's popularity. Prophets without honor and all that. I'll be going."

"Good idea. I need some sleep."

"You do. And Stac . . ." Cummins paused on his way into the hall, "there's a law clerk's job

open in my office when you need it."

"Go take a flying —"

"Goodbye."

Stac kept his eyes on Cummins until the lawyer had gone out of the door. Then he swung around and went into the kitchen. He stood just inside the door and looked at Lisa. His upper lip twitched.

"Breakfast's ready. Where's Tal?" Lisa said.

"Thanks. Tal's gone."

"What'd he want?"

Fuoss cut into a slice of ham. "Nothing much. Bunch of chatter, is all. Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No."

Fuoss looked up. Lisa was looking at him quietly.

"I was out with Brownie. His wife had a son and we were celebrating. That's all."

"All right, Stac." Lisa smiled. "Did you have that dream again?"

"Goddamn it!" Stac slammed his fist onto the tabletop. "Goddamn it to hell!"

PART II

Fuoss moved down the street. He stayed in the shadows and kept his footsteps light. He crossed the avenue and went into Carol's apartment house. He went into the lobby and pushed Carol's annunciator button.

A note, printed in Carol's

handwriting, full of sweepingly crossed T's and curlicued S's, was thrown on the screen beside the button.

Hi, whoever —

Sorry — nobody's home.
Don't know when I'll be back, but the lobby chairs are nice and cuddly if you want to wait. Or leave me a note.

See You.

Fuoss grimaced with satisfaction and turned the screen off. He went over to the chute, unlocked it, and rode to Carol's floor. He went down the hall to her apartment and let himself in.

Carol had left the lights on, as usual. He reached up to turn them off, then changed his mind. He went into the kitchen instead and took a can of beer. He removed the top and went into the bedroom, tilting his head back to let the beer slide down his throat.

The bedroom was a lot neater than he had expected it to be. The bedspread was folded over a chair and one of the vanity drawers was open, but the usual collection of washed but not yet ironed underthings was missing from the top of the bureau.

Fuoss put the beer can down on top of a table, went over to the closet and reached into a back corner. He pulled out his topcoat.

He put his hand in the left side pocket, fumbled around, grunted, tried the other pocket. He couldn't

find anything in that one, either. He frowned and got to his hands and knees to search the closet floor. There was nothing there.

He swung the closet door angrily. A negligee that had slipped from its hanger kept it from closing completely. He pushed the negligee farther inside with his foot and slammed the door shut. He walked toward the bed, tangling his feet in the top-coat he had thrown to the floor. He kicked it up into reach and threw it on the bed. He moved over to the table, picked up his can of beer and drained it. He stood in front of the open bedroom window, bouncing the can in his hand.

He threw the can out and lay down on the bed. He propped his head up with two pillows so that he could watch the entrance to the apartment through the open bedroom door.

The office boy was about sixteen. He had pimples and an elaborate coiffure that had to be rebuilt by frequent recourse to a men's room washbasin. He liked to smirk.

"They wanna see you in the V.P.'s office, Mister Fuoss," he said.

"Thanks."

"Right away."

"Thanks."

"There's an awful lot of big shots in there."

"Scram."

"Huh?"

"Whip out of here, punk. If I'm getting the ax, I can at least stop acting like a human fountain pen. Now get going, before I wipe my nose with you." Fuoss stood up, and the boy backed out of the way.

"So Cummins was right," Fuoss muttered. He rummaged quickly through his desk, taking out his fountain pens and a few other items that belonged to him. He ran across Brownfield's cigar, grinned, and put it in his breast pocket.

He walked back between the rows of desks toward the First Vice President's office. He had thought he'd be angry, or disappointed, perhaps, if Cummins' prediction actually came true. Instead, he discovered that he was feeling considerable relief. When he walked into the office, there was a slight smile at the corners of his mouth.

The office boy had been right. Aside from the division head, there was a complete representation of section supervisors. Brownfield sat in one corner.

"Good morning, Mr. Crofton, Mr. Mantell. Good morning, John, Harry, George," Fuoss said heartily. "Good morning, Brownie."

Crofton, the V.P., frowned. "Good morning, Fuoss. Sit down." Fuoss moved into the indicated

chair, crossed his legs and sat back. "What's up, W.C.?" One of the section heads snickered.

"I'd regard this occasion in a more serious light if I were you," Crofton said heavily.

Fuoss smiled. "It's a question of relative importance, I imagine," he said. He leaned forward. "Look, Mr. Crofton, Let's cut this short. You're a busy man and I've got a new job to look for, so suppose I just have Ruthie run up a letter of resignation and we'll get this thing done right. Will any excuse do, or do you have some particular preference?"

There was an uncomfortable rustling among the section heads, but Crofton took it without any special reaction. "No. Almost anything will do. Make it effective next Wednesday. I'm sorry to see you go, Fuoss. On the other hand, I have no choice. You'll acquaint Mr. Brownfield with the cases you're handling currently." He extended a hand smilingly.

"Oh, I don't think I'll wait that long. Suppose I make it effective at five o'clock yesterday? And as for me acquainting Brownie with my current cases, that's hardly necessary, since most of them were his originally, anyway. Well, so long." He flipped a hand in salute and walked out.

Brownfield caught up with him in the cloakroom. "Say, Stac, I'm sorry this happened," he

said, fumbling at Fuoss's sleeve. "It's just that when you didn't show up yesterday, somebody remembered that we went out together the night before and started asking questions."

"Sure, Brownie."

"I'm glad you're taking this so calmly," Brownfield said, his face ineffectual.

"Sure. I'll see you around, huh, Brownie?" He put his jacket on, picked up his briefcase, and took the hand Brownfield extended. "Oh, yeah . . ." He reached into his breast pocket. "Have a cigar, Brownie."

Fuoss walked jauntily down the sidewalk toward the bar where he had met Carol. He picked up a paper at the corner newsstand, intending to check a few ads for luck. The sun was shining and a cool breeze came off the harbor.

He went into the bar and sat down. "Give me a gin and tonic, will you?" he said to the bartender and settled himself comfortably on the stool. His hands began to tremble, and he broke out in a sweat.

My God, what'm I going to do? I've got bills to pay, a wife to support. The rent's due pretty soon, and the tax instalment. What I've got in the bank won't carry me long. Where's it coming from?

He leaned forward and wrapped his fingers over the bar's molding.

He began to tremble violently.

"You all right, buddy?" the bartender asked, setting a shot glass and a glass of quinine water in front of him.

"Fine. Just don't mix that drink, and bring me another shot of gin." He raised the shot glass to his mouth and sucked the gin out jerkily.

Carol came in at about four. Fuoss waved to her from the booth he'd spent the day in. She smiled and went over.

"Hi!"

"Hiya. Real higher. Pull up a drink and sit down," Fuoss said.

Carol laughed.

"Lost my job. Nobody loves androids any more. Rather have people. You rather have people?"

Carol shook her head. "That's too bad. *I* love androids." She moved her hand over, on top of his. "To hell with people."

Fuoss grinned happily. "You're people. But you're *nice* people. One of nicest people I know." He threw back his head and laughed.

"Say, you *are* packaged. You want to come over to my place and sleep it off?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I need it. Thanks, Carol. Thanks a lot. You're one of the best. No, really, you are." He pushed his way out of the booth and stood up weakly.

He had the dream again, that night.

Lisa's eyes were underscored

by purple shadows. "Haven't we gone through this before, recently?"

Fuoss shut the door and dropped into a chair. "All right. Who'd you tell this time?"

Lisa's eyes widened with her failure to understand him.

Fuoss snorted. "Cut it out. I haven't known you for these years and not learned anything. Who?"

Lisa kept her eyes from his. "Tal."

"I thought so. Was he here again? To see me, of course."

"God, but you came back in a nasty mood!" Lisa clenched her fists, knuckles forward, woman-fashion.

"Long as I came back. That's all you've got to worry about. What'd you tell Cummins?"

"What do you mean what'd I tell him? I told him the truth."

"What's your version of 'the truth'?"

Lisa advanced toward him fiercely. "Stop it, Stac! I'm warning you — cut it out right now. I don't particularly give a damn if you spent the night in a hotel with some call girl, but don't come back in the morning and get nasty with me!"

Fuoss jumped out of his chair. Lisa's near-guess had come too close. He stood spraddle-legged in front of her, his arms shaking.

"Listen, baby," he said in a cold rage, "you're dead right.

What I did last night is my own business." He bounced his palm off his chest. "At most, it's *our* business — yours and mine; not Tal Cummins's, not anybody else's. You've got a hell of a nerve standing there all housewifey, with that Goddamned egg-sucking grin on your face, trying to bull me. And when I catch you lying —" he was breathing in short gasps "you pull off the oldest defensive stunt in the world by flaring up at me!"

His head was pounding. He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "Listen, Lisa-so-ashamed-of-being-an-android, Lisa-who-diddled-her-name-so-it-sounds-human, get me, *Lista*, and get me good! If it wasn't for me, you'd still be a sniveling shopgirl, and if it wasn't for me breaking my neck over a typewriter for five years, there'd be a carbon-copy of you on every block, and I'll bet my back teeth most of them wouldn't be too careful how they earned their keep, either. Just remember I set you up to a lifetime of Wednesday Bridge Clubs and Ladies Auxiliaries. Any time you decide you're going to get snotty with me, just run that over in your mind, and remember you're no better than a glorified animal cracker. I bought you, kid, lock, stock, and physiomolded backside. Now, clear out of my way and let me get some sleep."

"You bastard!" Lisa reached out an arm and clawed his face.

Fuoss ducked his head and pushed her away. He broke into short, high-pitched laughter. "Honey, that's one thing I *can't* be!" He turned around and walked toward the bedroom.

Lisa laughed too. "That's right. That's perfectly right. Just you remember that! You're nothing but a Goddamned android yourself."

Fuoss turned around. The blood had gone out of his face. He moved up on Lisa. "Watch yourself, baby. Be very careful what you say to me.

"In fact," he said slowly, "your troubles with me are over. Tal Cummins has clear title to you, at least as far as I'm concerned."

Carol was glad to have him move in with her. They spent the week end in a drunken stupor and he had the dream again.

The personnel manager shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Fuoss. We'd like to have a man of your experience with our organization, but we simply don't have any openings. Thank you for thinking of us, though, and we'll keep your application on file. I'll be sure to let you know if anything comes up."

"All right." Fuoss smiled and shook the man's hand. "Thanks, anyway."

"Certainly."

That night he and Carol got drunk together, and he had the dream again.

The next day a different personnel manager, for a company which would have paid five dollars a week less, was just as polite as the first.

An envelope from Tal Cummins' office had been delivered to him at Carol's apartment.

"How's it feel to be a correspondent, hon?" Fuoss asked her.

Carol shrugged.

They got drunk, Fuoss took some sleeping pills, and they went to bed.

On the following morning, he went down to his bank and discovered that Lisa had drawn out exactly one-half of his account. He sold his car on the way down to the employment agency.

Fuoss noticed an item in a newspaper on the employment agency bench:

ANDROIDS URGED AS IDEAL FOR EXPLORATION OF SPACE

In a letter released today by the office of the Secretary of Defense, Tal Cummins, prominent android and well-known legal figure, urged the use of androids as crewmen in the projected attempt to put a manned rocket in an orbit around the Earth.

"Authorities agree,"

Cummins said in his letter, "that there is no sure way of knowing whether human beings can live in deep space under any conditions without actually making the attempt. I submit that androids provide an easy means of practical testing. Moreover, for this and similar projects, such as the proposed Moon rocket and the later expeditions to Mars and Venus, specialized androids could be manufactured to meet special conditions, if it should prove that a humanoid organism cannot, for some reason, survive.

"Speaking for most androids, I can say that we would be glad to cooperate in any such program. Our satisfaction would lie in the knowledge that we had been of help in the greatest human undertaking since the dawn of civilization."

The office of the Secretary of Defense declined any official comment on the letter, but informed sources close to the Secretary admit that the proposal is being given serious consideration.

Fuoss's face was half-way between a scowl and a grin. "Half a loaf is better than none, eh, Cassandra?" he muttered. He re-read the story, which had drawn a two-column head on

page two, and this time he scowled. He got up, found a nickel in his pocket and went to a pay phone in the corner. He dialed Cummins' number, talked his way past two secretaries, and was connected with the lawyer.

"Hello, Stac! How are you?" Cummins' voice and expression were as urbane as ever.

"Okay. How's Lisa?"

"I — don't know. I haven't seen her." The lawyer's tone was an almost successfully concealed mixture of anger and disappointment.

Fuoss bared his teeth. "If I had time, I'd laugh like hell." He would have, too. "I've been reading about you in the papers, Tal."

"You mean Project Space-ward?"

"Is that what they're calling it? Wouldn't Project Grab be more appropriate?"

"Just what do you mean by that?" Cummins was angry.

"That was a mighty clever piece of work, boy. If I were human, I'd fall for it myself. But I'm not, so I don't go for it." Fuoss chuckled. "Not that I give a damn. In fact, I think it's kind of a good joke on the humans. Boy oh boy, are they in for a shock when your satellite station androids 'prove' that humans can't survive the conditions. But that shock's not going to be anything, is it? Not compared to the one they'll get when they wake up to

the fact that space belongs to the androids, and they had better be nice or they'll find themselves living on a second asteroid belt. I have to hand it to you, Cummins."

"All right, Stac. I won't try to kid you. That's exactly what I'm doing. Can you blame me? You, of all people. How many favors have the humans done you? They've fired you out of every job you ever held, and they're making it impossible for you to get another one. Tit for tat, Stac. They don't want us any more. All right — we'll give them Earth. But we'll take the rest of the universe for ourselves."

Fuoss shook his head. "Uh-uh. It might even happen. I hope so. But one thing stinks about this project, and that's you. You told me once that androids had no interest in their succeeding generation, remember? You were wrong. Whenever I see a young kid android, I try to do him all the favors I can. But as far as you're concerned, you were right. You look at life as a sort of Out-of-the-culture-dish, live a while, Into-the-recovery-vat process. As far as you're concerned, android history began on your Awareness Day, and will end with your death. So there's something in this for you, Cummins. There are mighty few drives left to an android. You've got the main one: power. Well, spin your little web.

Dream your little dream. I hope you get away with it: Not because I like you. Because I hate humans more."

He laughed. "Just thought I'd let you know how I feel. So long, pal." He cut the connection and watched the lawyer's face dissolve on the screen.

That day he got a job, but he was carrying a bottle around with him by then, so he was paid off at three o'clock.

Carol wasn't there when he reached home, so he got drunk by himself. And that night he had the dream again.

One of the interviewers at the employment agency looked him right in the eye and said, in an impatient tone of voice, "Let's face it, Fuoss. You're not going to get anywhere with trying for white-collar work. Not anymore. There's no point in getting emotional about it; it's a plain fact. It's the way things are today, and you've got to accept it. Why don't you try something like construction work? Your pay'll be a lot bigger than you'll ever get in an office."

Fuoss did a mental run-down on his bank balance. "All right."

But the union just couldn't provide jobs for all of its present members, much less take in a new one.

Tal Cummins had a guest appearance on a TV program, and

spoke at some length about Project Spaceward. By the time he got to the end of it, Fuoss had gotten tired of waiting for Carol and gone to bed. He had the dream again.

Carol woke him up on Saturday morning and made breakfast.

After breakfast they sat down on the couch and smoked.

"Where were you these last two nights," Fuoss asked.

"Out."

"Where?"

Carol turned her head and faced him. "Look, Stac, you're a nice guy. I like you. But liking you hasn't got much to do with it. You're living here — that's o.k., so far, but you haven't got any strings on me."

Fuoss shrugged. "Okay — if that's how it is."

They spent a pretty miserable week end.

Fuoss now took a job with a landscaping contractor out on Long Island. It paid a dollar and a half an hour, but it involved digging holes through fill that was well interlarded with brick halves, pieces of BX cable, folded lengths of thick tar paper, gravel and cinder block. His muscles weren't used to the job, but the worst strain was on his wrists, which took the shock of pick-swing that ended suddenly in some unseen obstacle. Nevertheless, he managed to last out the day with-

out blistering his palms too badly.

When he rode back to the apartment that night, he felt better than he had in days.

Carol was home. He came in the door and she looked up. "Christ!" She stared at his clothes. "What've you been doing? Digging ditches?"

"That's right — just about, anyway. Digging holes for trees. You get your hands dirty, but you make money. Twelve bucks today." He grinned. He was feeling good.

Carol nodded. "Uh-huh. Twelve bucks. Go take a shower, will you?"

When he came out, she was waiting for him. She was walking around in haphazard circles, smoking a cigarette. "Sit down, will you, Stac?"

"Sure. What's cooking?"

"Look — today's the first of the month. Rent's due. You want to pay half of it?"

He frowned. "Christ, I'd like to, Carol. You know that. But I can't. I haven't got any money. I can give it to you in about two weeks."

"Yeah . . . maybe. And could you raise fifty-five more two weeks after that?"

"Hell, Carol, sure. Twelve bucks a day comes out to sixty a week."

"Before taxes, social security, unemployment insurance, transportation, lunches and cigarettes

it does, yeah. Add laundry bills to that, too. What's more, this is August now. How much longer do you think landscaping's going to be open?"

"All right — so it's not the best job in the world!"

"I didn't say that. You should be able to make out pretty well with it, and they'll probably find you a winter job. Or else you can hole up on your unemployment checks. But not here, Stac. Not the way you're living." She flipped the cigarette into the sink.

"What're you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying — I'm saying. It's a matter of simple economics." She sat down beside him and put her hand on his knee. "Look, honey, I've been paying for your food the last two weeks. Some of the liquor we've mopped up you've bought, but most of it was here when you came. Up to now it hasn't cost you a dime to live here — or it wouldn't have, if you weren't a lush."

"Goddamn it! I am not a lush! I come home, we have a couple of drinks after supper, and then we start necking. Next thing we know, we're pie-eyed. But that doesn't make me a lush!" He realized that there were bigger things to argue over, but for some reason he kept pressing this point, as if concentrating on it would make the other problems disappear.

"Okay, honey." Carol stroked

his hair. "Okay." She smiled, "You know, a doctor I knew once said that alcohol was an extreme form of sublimation. But I can't imagine what *you* would be sublimating." She grinned, and Fuoss grinned with her.

"Okay. I made a funny," Carol said. "That doesn't change anything. I can't afford to keep you, and you can't afford to stay. It's tough, but it's true." Impulsively, she put her arms around his neck. "Look, you ought to get yourself a room somewhere near where you work. It'll work out fine that way. You can still come and see me."

Fuoss sat stiffly, looking at the opposite wall over her shoulder. "Sure. Sure, Carol. I understand. It'll work out pretty well." He tightened his arms around her. "I'll find a good job for the Winter, and then maybe we can really set up something in style."

"I'd like that, Stac," she murmured in his ear. She drew her head back and kissed him. "I like you, Stac. You know I do. It just doesn't work out right now. You know that."

"Sure."

He moved to a furnished room in New Hyde Park, and rode the bus a mile up to work for ten days. He wrote Carol a few letters, and got a few answers. He read the paper one day and saw that Operation Spaceward had offici-

ally begun. Stock in Androids Incorporated, DuPont, and General Aniline went up again. Tal Cummins was getting his, but the androids — *we're getting ours, too.*

On Friday, the fourteenth of August and the thirteenth day of his last two weeks, he went out to Babylon with his crew.

They dug a hole two yards deep and about five across for an oak the owner wanted moved into it. They cut a ramp into one side of the hole, and craned the tree over to the top of the ramp. A bunch of overhead wires that couldn't be cut or moved kept them from dropping the tree in, so they mounted it upright on a skid, lashed the tree firmly, and guyed it to the front bumper of a truck with a couple of lengths of Manila.

Stac was driving the truck. As the rest of the crew manhandled the tree over the lip of the ramp, he was supposed to lower it slowly, keeping the truck in double-low and judging the strain on the Manila.

It didn't work out that way. The Manila snapped, lashed a couple of boys across the face, and fouled the skid. The tree tipped forward, picked up momentum, and toppled over, catching a man under the branches.

Stac got out of the truck and the Boss came over to him.

"You stupid son-of-a-bitch!" the Boss said. "You stupid *android* son-of-a-bitch! I should have

had more sense than to hire a _____!"

It was the first time Stac had heard the word, but it was self-explanatory. It described in a simple term the substances from which they claimed androids were made.

Fuoss reached out and gathered the Boss's shirt up in his hands. "I ought to hit you," he said. "I ought to rub your face on a macadam road and drive a truck over your crotch."

The Boss turned pale. He saw the look on Fuoss's face. "You're nuts!" he screamed.

Fuoss laughed and pushed him away. "Yeah."

He had done it so many times that the blanket's constriction was nothing new. His arms flailed and his pillow fell to the floor, knocking the bottle over.

Woman.

Stac — little Stac, his firstborn. Have a cigar, Brownie. Have a cigar, you smug bastard. Good cigar, Brownie — nothing's too good for the firstborn. Have a fat cigar.

Woman. The woman raised her face.

Carol. *Carol!*

The Boss said Get the hell away from her, you second-hand son of a dog and a orang utang.

Carol said You second-hand son of a hyena and a vulture.

Little Stac said You second-

hand son of a son of a son of a
son of a son of a son of a . . .

He went out in the morning and bought another bottle. He went into the candy store next door for a pack of cigarettes, and then he went back to the liquor store and bought another bottle to make sure.

PART III

He looked at his watch. 2:30. Sunday morning, but still Saturday night, by almost anybody's definition. He moved his feet impatiently on the bed.

The door to the apartment opened, and Carol came in. There was a man with her.

"Go home, Brownie. Go home to your wife and your firstborn son."

"God! What's keeping him on his feet?"

"Never mind what's keeping me on my feet, Brownie. Go home."

Brownfield left. "I'll call the police for you, Carol."

"Are you crazy? He's all right — he's just packaged. I've seen him like this before. You know — he's right. Go home to your wife. I'll take care of him."

"Well, all right."

"You bet it's all right. Now beat it." Fuoss locked the door behind him, turned around and leaned against it.

"Hi, Carol."

She smiled hesitantly. "Hi, Stac."

"Marry me, Carol?"

"Not right now, Stac. It's kind of late. Why don't you sack out and we can talk about it in the morning."

"Uh-uh. This morning business doesn't go. You gonna marry me?"

"Look, Stac, fun's fun, and drinking's drinking, but there's a limit. I'm not sure I even want you to sleep here. There's a hotel down the block. Stay there and I'll see you in the morning."

"Can't stay at any hotel. Haven't got any more money. I had some in my topcoat pocket, but you took it."

"I didn't take it. There wasn't any there. You took every cent you had to the Island with you."

"You took it all right. But that's okay. I'll forgive you. Just marry me."

Carol moved around to the other side of an easy chair. "What are you talking about? Me, marry an android?"

"Listen, Carol. You've got to do it. Nobody's ever tried it before. Maybe there's a chance."

"A chance for what?"

Fuoss spread his arms pleadingly. "For Stac — for little Stac. We've got to try it, Carol. Please. Marry me, Lisa, please."

"My name isn't Lisa! You're crazy, you're raving nuts. Get the

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THE CLOSED DOOR

By KENDALL FOSTER CROSSEN

This is a detective story. Without, we hasten to add, private eyes, blonds, beds, bigamy or bottles of bourbon. The setting is a luxurious interplanetary hotel three hundred years in the future, and the hero — Detective Inspector Calder — is a quiet young man who reads Rex Stout in the original English and goes to bed, alone, each evening at ten.

Mr. G. G. Gru had been slain while alone in his room. There were no windows, and the single door could be opened only with the active aid of the victim. Yet the killer had done his job despite the most rigid safeguards known to science. Certainly it was impossible — except that Mr. Gru was stone cold dead. . . .

ALISTER CHU, manager of the Planetary Rest Hotel, was a much disturbed man. The Galactic Acrylic Convention was in full swing, which meant that he hadn't slept for two days. When he wasn't rushing to answer the demands of a convention committee,

he was busy soothing the complaints of non-convention guests. At the moment, he was trying to estimate the damage resulting from the latest cocktail party, while a group of Acruxians sang their national anthem in the corridor and two delegates from Can-

opus were in the Solar Room hammering out a Nocturne that had been especially arranged for polydactylic pianists. And then his visiphone buzzed.

Without noting the origin of the call, Alister Chu flipped the switch and fairly snarled into his mouth-piece: "Well, what do you want?" Then he recognized the face on the screen. It was one of the hotel's most important guests, and there was no doubt that he was also an angry guest. Alister quickly erased the anger from his own face and added: "Sorry, Mr. Gru, I . . . the convention is making me rather jumpy."

"It's making me more than that," snapped the guest. He spoke Terran with hardly a trace of an accent. "If there's one thing I can't abide, it's practical jokers. You'd better get up here at once, Chu."

"Right away, sir. What seems to be the trouble?"

"I've already told you," the guest said. His gaze shifted away for a minute. "The Warning Red just flashed on in my room, so you'll have to wait until your damned Mercurian stops parading up and down the hall, but I want you here immediately afterward. I will not stand—" He broke off and a startled expression came over his face. Alister Chu saw that he was staring off to one side of the visiphone, then he started to scribble madly with a

pencil on the pad that was beside the phone. "I was wrong," he said thickly. "It's not —"

At this point, as it seemed to Chu, the guest fell apart. Not literally, of course, but there was a minute when his face seemed to be working in all directions at once, then he fell forward in front of the visiphone. From the way he fell, Alister Chu was almost certain that he was dead.

Then a gloved hand came into view on the screen, moved quickly to the phone itself, and the screen went dead.

Alister Chu went quickly from the room, stopping for a moment beside the desk of his assistant. "Something's happened upstairs," he said quietly. "I think you had better put in a call for the police. I'll be on the hundred and seventieth floor. Mr. Gru's room." He hurried on toward the elevators, trying to look as if nothing had happened.

Chief Inspector Maiset, head of the Solar Department, Terran Division, took the call that came into the Interplanetary Criminal Police Commission. Since it was coming in over a closed circuit, he didn't bother to activate the screen. He never did on such calls, his reason being, as he said, that he saw enough policemen without looking at another one when it was not necessary.

"Maiset here," he said into the

audiphone. He listened for a few minutes, doing nothing more than grunt occasionally to show that he was still there. "Let me see now," he said amiably when his caller had run down, "you say the case involves suspected murder, although you're not sure anyone is dead; a hotel full of suspects, if it is necessary to suspect anyone of anything, these being delegates from all over the galaxy. That about it? No, no, you did quite right. I expect you'll be needing someone like Detective Inspector Calder. He'll be right along. You'll meet him? Good."

Chief Inspector Maiset disconnected. He leaned over and pressed one of a number of buttons on his desk, then waited patiently.

After a moment the door to his office opened and a young man stepped inside. Being a detective, he was in plain clothes. That is, he wore an attractive one-piece suit which made him look like any one of a dozen successful young businessmen. But his face lacked the alertness of such young men, his expression usually giving the impression that he was half asleep.

"Another official call, I see," the young man said as he came up to the chief inspector's desk.

"That's true," admitted Maiset, "but how did you know?"

"Simple deduction," the young man answered. "When it's an official call, you never activate the

screen. There is, you'll note, a slight film of dust over the screen switch. Since you also never summon me unless there's a case, it means you just received a plea for help from some other station. That, in turn, means a case involving either delicate interplanetary relations or murder."

The chief inspector beamed at the young man. Detective Inspector Jair Calder was always making just such deductions as these. Although it was an age when crime was usually solved by unrelieved science, the chief inspector was a sentimental man who delighted in the old literature of crime, and therefore never ceased to be pleased by Calder's ability.

"You're right," he said. "I just had a call from Sub-Inspector Aly Mordette of the Terran Provincial Police. It's suspected murder *and* delicate interplanetary relations. At the new Planetary Rest Hotel. You know where it is?"

Inspector Calder nodded.

"All that Mordette has done is throw an energy belt around the hotel so that no one can enter or leave. He'll meet you on the Third Level above the hotel and key you through the belt."

Inspector Calder nodded again and left.

A few minutes later he arrived at the Third Level in his small, inconspicuous air-car. He was broadcasting a short-wave im-

pulse which only the police sets could pick up as a means of identification.

The police cruiser soon came alongside, then led the way down toward the hotel. Inspector Calder set his air-car down on the rooftop of the hotel, and by the time he climbed out the uniformed sub-inspector was waiting for him.

The latter was a large, abdominal man, whose light blue uniform managed to look wrinkled in spite of being manufactured from non-wrinkleable plastic. The expression on his red face indicated that the sub-inspector was a man who lived in an aura of constant suspicion.

"Inspector Jair Calder?" he asked formally as Jair stepped from his car.

"Yes," Jair said pleasantly. "I take it you're Sub-Inspector Mordette? A bit of a go here, eh?"

"It would seem so," the sub-inspector said glumly. "I haven't done a thing, you understand. The hotel is filled with all sorts of queer fish — and some of them are fish — and there's no telling what'll hurt their feelings. A mere sub-inspector in the Provincial Police doesn't carry much weight, I can tell you."

"Just so," Jair agreed. "I expect we ought to look in on the trouble, don't you think?"

"We'll have to do down to the hundred and seventieth floor," the sub-inspector said. He started





for the elevators and Inspector Calder fell into step beside him. "Things haven't changed much, I tell you, in spite of all the talk about living in a brave new galaxy."

"How do you mean?" Jair asked.

The sub-inspector waved his hand at the hotel. "All this. Convention at a hotel. Place filled with big shots. A guy gets murdered — probably for the same sort of reason people were murdered three hundred years ago. And it's a time for the little policeman to watch his step or some big shot will have his job. Oh, we have our Twenty-second Century gadgets, but everything works just the same as it did in the Nineteenth or Twentieth Century. You can take my word for it, Inspector."

"I shall," Jair said amiably.

The sub-inspector scowled uncertainly, but was silent for the rest of the trip. When they stepped out of the elevator on the 170th floor, it seemed that the hall was filled with policemen. But finally, halfway down the corridor, Jair caught sight of an immaculately dressed man who could only be the manager of the hotel. He saw them at the same time and hurried to meet them.

"Well, I'm certainly glad that you're here," he said, speaking directly to Jair and ignoring the

sub-inspector. "I do trust that this unfortunate matter can be handled discreetly. We have a number of important men here this week and I wouldn't want them disturbed."

"We shall handle them most gently," Jair said. "I'm Inspector Calder, of Planepol. And you're—?"

"Alister Chu," the manager said. "I have the honor of being the manager of —"

"Of course," Jair interrupted. "Now, what seems to be the trouble?"

The manager quickly told of the call he'd received from the guest on this floor. He explained the whole thing in great detail, including his impression of the guest's falling apart: "Not literally, of course." By the time he'd finished, they were standing in front of the room in question.

"Of course," Jair said, agreeing with the impression. He glanced around the luxurious, brightly-colored corridor. "You know, this is the first time I've seen the Planetary Rest Hotel, although I've read about it. Everything is constructed of plastic, eh?"

"Oh, yes." For a minute, pride replaced the worried look on Alister Chu's face. "As you may know, the hotel is owned by Plasti-corp and they built everything with their own products. There are two hundred and seventy-three different plastics used. No-

tice how springy the floor is; it cuts down fatigue by sixty per cent. The doors, for example, are of Plexilite with a tensile strength several times that of steel. Then, due to a few new formulas, we are the only hotel capable of catering to every life form in the galaxy —”

“I was wondering about that,” interrupted Jair Calder. “Do you have separate sections for the inhabitants of other planets?”

“Oh, no. We have special rooms, of course, but they’re on the same floors. Why, there are a number of rooms for Mercurians right here on this floor.”

“Mercurians? I should think it would be dangerous for your human guests having them on the same floor.”

“No danger of that at all,” the manager said. “When the Mercurians want to leave their rooms they naturally have to come through a sort of air-lock. There are warning lights which go on in all the other rooms, in the hallway and in the elevators. This gives everyone a good thirty seconds to get out of the way.”

“What about damage to the hallway?”

“None at all,” the manager said with pride. “A Mercurian passing through the hall will raise the temperature to about two hundred degrees Centigrade, but none of the plastic used will grow

soft at temperatures below two hundred and fifty degrees Centigrade. So there’s plenty of margin. And the hallway reverts to its normal temperature within thirty seconds after the Mercurian has passed. At the end of the hall there are special Mercurian elevators, taking them down to where they can enter their fire coaches.”

“All of this is very interesting,” Jair Calder said, “but I suspect we’d better get down to cases. This the room of the guest?”

“Yes.”

“His name?”

“G. G. Gru. He’s been coming here regularly since we opened, and he always reserves the same room.”

“He was not, I take it, a delegate to the convention?”

“Oh, no. In fact, he loathed the convention.”

“I see. Well, since he doesn’t answer the door, I expect you’d better open it.”

For the first time, the manager looked embarrassed. “I can’t,” he said.

Something akin to interest crept into Inspector Calder’s eyes. “Why not?”

“Well, we have two sorts of doors here. The regular doors are locked or unlocked by a combination of pressures. The combination is given the guest and then changed for the next guest. Naturally, the management has no difficulty opening those doors if

circumstances demand it. But with certain regular guests — and Mr. Gru was one of these — we replace the door with a special one with a palm-lock keyed to the atomic structure of the guest. No one but the guest can either lock or unlock these doors."

"Ah," said Jair Calder. He was really interested now. "I presume there is interior ventilation and so no windows?"

"That is correct, Inspector."

"And this door is the only entrance or exit?"

"Yes."

Inspector Calder looked again at the door. It was a plain plastic door, dark green in color, perfectly smooth and unbroken except for the slight impression, in the shape of a hand, which was the palm-lock.

Now the inspector, like his chief, was of a romantic turn of mind and was fond of the old literature on crime. So, perhaps, it was only natural that, staring at the door, he muttered to himself: "If Gideon Fell could have lived to see this . . ."

"I beg your pardon, Inspector?" the manager said.

"Nothing," Jair Calder said hurriedly. "An unimportant historical allusion. Now, Mr. Chu, I believe you said that Mr. Gru was on the visiphone to you at the time he was apparently killed? And that you yourself saw an-

other hand reach in and turn off the visiphone?"

"That's right."

"And you also tell me that this door — which is the only egress to this room — could not be locked or unlocked by anyone except Mr. Gru?"

"That is also correct, Inspector."

"But then," suddenly exclaimed Sub-Inspector Mordette, "that means the murderer is still in the room. We'd better prepare to rush him."

"It'll be a pity if you're right," Inspector Calder said. "And how do you suggest rushing into the room, Sub-Inspector?"

"Why — why —" stammered the official, "I guess we'll just break the door down."

"You couldn't break that door down if you had a thousand men," the manager said with a patronizing air.

"He's right, you know," said Jair. He drew a small weapon from his pocket. "But I expect this will get us in. Plexilite, I believe you said?"

"What's that?" the manager asked.

"Aromatic hydrocarbon gun," the inspector answered. "Very useful in getting through Plexilite doors. In fact, it's the only thing that'll do the trick." He aimed the gun and moved it in a half circle while holding the trigger down. The door swung open, leav-

ing a half-moon section hanging from the lock.

Mr. G. G. Gru was slumped across his desk in front of the visiphone screen, in much the fashion that the hotel manager had described. There was no doubt that he was quite dead.

Inspector Jair Calder walked across and stood looking down at the body, ignoring the fact that Sub-Inspector Mordette and his men were sniffing around the room with drawn weapons. Then, as he saw Mordette approaching, he leaned over and ripped off the top sheet of a scratch pad on the desk. He folded back the top inch or so and held it in his hand. There was a jagged tear across the lower half.

"No villain, eh, Mordette?" he asked casually.

"No," growled the sub-inspector. "An Algenibian worm couldn't be hidden in here without my men finding him." He stopped and gazed down at the body. "No wound. Must have been a magnetic weapon."

Inspector Calder grunted what might have been either an affirmative or negative.

"Demagnetized," Mordette said with scorn. "Just a fancy method of electrocution. I told you that even methods hadn't changed in the last two hundred years."

"So you did," murmured Jair. "Mr. Chu, I take it that Mr. Gru

here was from Sirius Two?"

"Yes, Inspector."

"Hmmm. I thought so. Humanoid, but a Si-type of life." He glanced again at the paper in his hand. "As you probably suspected, Mr. Chu, the victim did try to leave us a clue to his death, but I'm afraid most of it has been made off with." He held the paper up so that the others could see it. One jagged piece of paper, torn on both sides, still retained a crude drawing of a six-sided figure and the letters *COO*.

"Coo?" asked a bewildered sub-inspector. "What sort of a clue is that?"

"Not a very good one, I'm afraid," admitted Jair. "By itself, the word might indicate a soft murmuring sound — hardly to be associated with an act of violence. I believe at one time it was also an expression of surprise among a small lower-class group of Terrans. Then again — and perhaps more to our purpose — it might be part of a name. Mr. Chu . . ."

"Yes, Inspector?"

"I'd like a little assistance, please. First, a place where I may conduct the investigation. Preferable a comfortable place where I might also have some coffee. Then, someone sufficiently familiar with the convention here to inform me about the various delegates. Thirdly, I'd like a quick search

made of your register and a list of all names which have the letters C-O-O appearing together."

"Of course, sir," the manager said. "We have a rather comfortable executive's lounge."

"Fine." Inspector Calder walked out of the room with the others trooping behind him. As he stepped into the hallway, he lurched and almost fell. He stooped quickly and came up holding a small, transparent six-sided figure. As he held it up to the light, faint markings could be seen inside as if someone had managed to etch the letter U within the solid.

"A rather interesting piece of Plexilite," he observed. "Any idea what it was doing in the corridor, Mr. Chu?"

"No," the manager said. He stepped closer and looked at it. "Looks like interior etching. Could it be some sort of costume jewelry, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Jair said. He tossed it in the air a couple of times and then put it in his pocket. He took one more look at the door. "Mr. Chu, what about someone's removing the door from its hinges?"

"It can only be done when the current is off or when the door is unlocked, and even then it's a good twenty-minute job. There would have been no time for the . . . ah . . . murderer to replace the door. You will remember the warning light went on while Mr.

Gru was speaking to me. So a Mercurian went down the hallway within thirty seconds and I myself was here as soon as the Mercurian returned to his room."

"Of course. Shall we go lounge like executives?"

The manager disapproved of the levity, but he led the way to the elevator without speaking.

"Now," said Inspector Calder, when they were in the luxurious executive's lounge, "before you dash off to fetch my coffee, the list of names, and a convention expert, would you know the time you received the call from Mr. Gru?"

"Yes," said the manager. "It was just one minute past two o'clock."

"Then," said Jair, writing the time down, "Mr. Gru was murdered at approximately one minute and ten seconds past two. The Mercurian entered the hallway at approximately one minute and thirty-five seconds past two. How long would you say before he returned to his room?"

"Four or five minutes. I waited in the elevator until the light went off."

"Let's say five minutes. So at six minutes and thirty-five seconds, the Mercurian went back to his room of fire. Then, at seven minutes and five seconds past two, you entered the corridor — and found it empty?"

The manager nodded.

"Good. While you're about it, you might also find out which one of your Mercurians was promenading down the corridor."

Inspector Calder studied the timetable he'd written down, ignoring the glum-looking sub-inspector, until the hotel manager returned. With him was another Terran, a rather brusque-looking young man dressed in the latest sports-plastic.

"This," he said, "is James Bruce. He's an employee of Plasticorp and has been in charge of the present Acrylic convention. Mr. Bruce, Inspector Calder of the I.C.P.C."

"Hi, Inspector," the newcomer said in a breezy fashion. "Chu, here, told me about the business upstairs. I'll be glad to help in any way I can. I do hope, however, that your investigation won't disturb our convention too much. We have some pretty important men here." He bore down on the word *important* just enough. Jair Calder got the implication, but gave no recognition of it.

"We'll try to keep the murder from inconveniencing you too much," he said dryly. "What is your position with Plasticorp, Mr. Bruce?"

"Vice president in charge of testing. But I'm also the convention chairman. And if I do say it myself, this is one of our best conventions. We've been having

a high old time, if you know what I mean." He managed a leer that was about as crude as anything Calder had seen in a long time.

"Quite," the Inspector said. "Mr. Chu, the names?"

"Only four guests fit the requirements," the manager said. "Cooerl II, from Mercury. Rruda Akcoo of Mars. Somer Alcoon of Rigel. And Amos Coombs, a Terran. All of them are delegates to the convention."

Jair Calder nodded and turned to the convention chairman. "You know them, Mr. Bruce?"

"Sure. All of them are good guys."

"They are delegates from different companies?"

"Not exactly," Bruce said. "To get the picture, you have to realize that Plasticorp controls about ninety per cent of the plastics business in the galaxy. There are a few minor companies, but almost everyone at this convention is a part of Plasticorp. These four are all executives in the corporation. I'll vouch for them, Inspector."

"That's nice of you," Jair Calder said dryly. He turned back to the manager. "Did you learn which Mercurian was out?"

The manager nodded. "By a strange coincidence, it was this same Cooerl II."

"Let's hope it was no more than a coincidence. You have a flame-suit I can borrow?"

The manager nodded.

"I'll go up and see Cooerl II then," the inspector said. "Mr. Bruce, I wonder if you'd mind learning the whereabouts of Coombs, Akcoo, and Alcoon at about two o'clock?"

"Sure thing," Bruce said.

Inspector Calder donned a standard flame-suit and returned to the hundred and seventieth floor. He'd arranged for the desk to announce he was coming, so he was admitted without delay. Once the inner door had closed, the Mercurian turned from the controls and greeted his visitor politely.

The Mercurians were, of course, originally descended from a form of salamander, but Cooerl II stood upright and resembled a salamander about as much as Jair Calder resembled the Pekin Man. The Mercurian and the Terran exchanged polite views on the weather, the Mercurian's relatives, and other such unimportant matters for several minutes.

"I understand," Jair Calder finally said, "that you were out in the hall briefly this afternoon. I wonder if you'd mind telling me why?"

"Certainly not." The Mercurian's voice sounded querulous in the head-phones. "I was notified by the operator that there was a visiphone call for me. There is no set in my room — I understand

the heat is not good for the screen — and so I went to the public visiphone booth at the end of the corridor. But there was no one there when I answered. Apparently the party had hung up, or it was a practical joke."

"Strange," said Jair, more to himself, "this is the second mention of a practical joke without any more evidence than that. You met no one in the hallway?"

"Of course not. It would be dangerous to anyone other than another Mercurian or someone dressed as you are now."

Inspector Calder wasted another few minutes telling the Mercurian how much he admired his home planet and wishing him warmth and good health, and then left the room. Out in the hall he removed the flame-suit, emerging drenched in sweat, and went back downstairs. The manager, Mr. Bruce and the Provincial Police still waited for him.

"I checked up on the boys for you," Bruce announced. "All three of them have perfect alibis. They were in a committee meeting from one until three."

"Thank you," said Inspector Calder. "What about yourself?"

"Me?" asked the startled vice president. "You're kidding, Inspector. But if you really want to know, I got an alibi too."

Jair Calder nodded agreeably and sat down. He tasted the coffee

which was sitting at his place and was glad to find it fresh and hot. Then he turned to the manager.

"Mr. Chu, I must trouble you for two more things. I'd like all the elevator operators who were on duty from about twelve o'clock to after two brought here one at a time so that I can question them. I'd also like to question any other guests on the hundred and seventieth floor who were in their rooms at about two o'clock. That is, excepting the Mercurians. Then — I believe the hotel has its own shops, does it not?"

"Yes, indeed. You can purchase anything without leaving the hotel."

"Good. Check each shop and get me a list of any unusual purchases made during the past two days." He waited until the manager left the room and then smiled at Sub-Inspector Mordette. "Best do this in an orderly fashion, eh, Mordette? Looks better on the report."

"You see," Mordette said triumphantly, "even you must follow the exact form that was used centuries ago."

"I'll make a note of it," Jair said solemnly.

For the next several minutes, he was busy with the stream of hotel employees who came in to be questioned, all of them nattily attired in the hotel service uniform. But the result of the questioning only proved that no one

had been on the one hundred and seventieth floor between twelve and two o'clock except G. G. Gru, himself, and the Mercurian.

The manager returned to report that the other guests of the one hundred and seventieth floor had all been downstairs with the exception of a rather ill-tempered crustacean from Aldebaran who refused even to be questioned.

Inspector Calder nodded and seemed to lose interest in that trend of thought.

"You will be finished soon, won't you?" the manager inquired anxiously. He stifled his conviction that the inspector was incompetent and would never be finished.

"I expect so," Jair said. "You checked with your shops?"

"Yes. There were a few unusual purchases. The Pleasure Shop sold a silver-handled whip to a visiting Terran and had one request for Martian *Jhung* cigarettes. These are illegal, of course, so there was no sale. The Dispensary sold a small order of carbolic acid and one of formaldehyde, and then an Antarean came in this morning to purchase a — a —"

"Never mind," Inspector Calder said. "I'm well aware of the moral habits of Antareans. I think I'd like to make an outside call. Where is the nearest public visiphone booth?"

"Through there," the manager said, indicating a door.

While the inspector was gone, the manager tried to hold a conversation with the sub-inspector in the hope of learning that Inspector Calder had some idea of leaving the hotel before too long.

"Maybe it was suicide," he suggested, glancing idly at a hotel service man who had entered and was fixing one of the wall lights. "I've heard that the inhabitants of Sirius II are often melancholy. And after all, the room was locked."

"Personally," the sub-inspector finally said, "I'd think that somebody pumped poison through your ventilating system, if it weren't for the fact that you saw the murderer's hand on the screen. And maybe that's what it was anyway. Witnesses are never very reliable."

"Nonsense," the manager said sharply. "It couldn't be done." He looked sharply at the sub-inspector, but the latter had already decided he'd been hasty in venturing an opinion at all.

"I'd vote for suicide," James Bruce added. "Moody, all of those humanoid types. They're almost human, but not quite, and they can't stand it."

Sub-Inspector Mordette still refused to rise to the bait, so the three men fell silent. They watched the repairman stroll from the room, then turned to staring at the ceiling while they waited.

"Well," said Inspector Calder,

coming back into the room in what seemed to be good humor, "I expect we'll be through with this shortly." He sat in his chair and pulled out a cigarette case. "Cigarette, anyone?"

James Bruce took one, but the others refused.

"I say," Calder exclaimed. He reached over and grabbed Bruce's lighter just as he was about to activate it. Then he jumped up and went over to the wall. He reached up and pulled a small brown ball from the wall. "A thallium bomb," he said to the others. "A good thing I saw it before you struck that lighter. The slightest change in temperature and we would've all been poisoned."

"Good heavens," said the manager. His face was pale, a color that was matched by the faces of the other two men. "How did it get there? There hasn't been anyone in the room but the three of us."

"No one?" Jair Calder asked softly.

"Not a soul. It—" A startled expression came over the manager's face. "There was a repairman," he said. His face darkened with anger. "I'll—"

"Never mind," said the inspector. He opened a small case and popped the thallium bomb into it. "I was the repairman who came in. It was easy to borrow a coat. I also put the bomb there."

"But why?"

"I just wanted to demonstrate that the testimony we received stating no one appeared on the one hundred and seventieth floor meant nothing. Repairmen, like servants, are invisible people. I think we can be pretty sure that our murderer, dressed in a hotel uniform, was up on the floor twice today."

"Twice?" said Mordette. "Why twice?"

"First, he had to arrange matters—it was this arrangement which Mr. Gru thought was a practical joke. Then, after arranging for a call to be put through to Cooerl II, he returned to the floor, killed Mr. Gru, grabbed up the clue or part of it, ran out and off the floor. Thirty seconds doesn't sound like much time, but he needed no more."

"But—but what about the door?" asked the manager.

"Oh, yes, he unlocked the unlockable door and locked it again."

"But it's impossible."

"Only improbable," Jair Calder said. "Mr. Chu, where did you keep the special door to that room when the guest from Sirius II was not here?"

"In the workshop in the basement."

"And the regular door is kept there when Mr. Gru is in the hotel?"

The manager nodded.

"I wonder if you'd mind phon-

ing down and checking the door situation now?" the inspector asked.

The manager crossed the room in nervous strides to an audiophone. He talked for a minute, then returned, a frown on his face.

"I don't understand it," he said. "They report that the regular door and the special door are both there. That means—"

"A third door," finished Jair Calder. "Also special, in that it was made for this one occasion. I might add that it was just like your special door except for a slight chemical difference. The murderer's first trip was to install his door, of course. By the way," he added, turning to Bruce with a smile, "as vice president in charge of testing I imagine you carry a Sonicolt, don't you?"

The vice president nodded.

"Could I see it a moment?"

James Bruce handed over what appeared to be a good-sized automatic pistol. Inspector Calder peered at it.

"A 47-M caliber," he said. "You use this for testing plastic?"

"Yeah," Bruce said. "That's the best Sonicolt made. Our plastic will stand the full force of it, even through a supersonic periodic disturbance of 47,000 cycles per second, it is even strong enough to ki—" He broke off.

"Exactly," the inspector said softly. "While relatively harmless

to human beings, a Sonicolt will kill anyone from Sirius II. And it was such a weapon as this that killed Mr. Gru."

"But I don't understand," said the manager.

"Si-type life form," said Jair. "The inhabitants of Sirius II, while humanoid in appearance, have a silicon constitution instead of carbon. A supersonic weapon of this strength would literally shatter their insides. So you weren't so far wrong, Mr. Chu, when you said you had the impression he was falling apart."

"Why was he murdered?" Mordette asked.

"I think it was over plastics," said the inspector.

"Nonsense," James Bruce declared roughly. "Sirius II has never been in the race on plastics."

"But I think they were about to get into it through Mr. Gru," Jair Calder said pleasantly. "Mr. Bruce, you're more familiar with plastic formulae than I am. I wonder if you'd check the formula I've written down." He handed a

sheet of paper to the vice president.

The latter looked at the paper and his face twisted with rage. He leaped to his feet, one hand darting for his pocket.

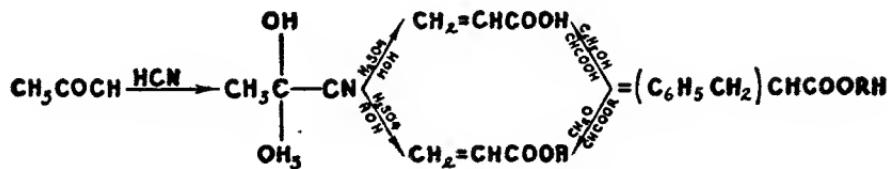
But for all of his faults, Sub-Inspector Mordette needed only one hint to alert him. He'd gotten that hint from the tone of Calder's voice. He grabbed James Bruce and snatched the small magnetic gun out of his hand before he had a chance to use it. Then, still holding the vice president with one ham-like hand, he looked to the Interplanetary detective.

"He's the murderer all right," Inspector Calder said. "Take him away."

Sub-Inspector Mordette motioned toward the door and two of his men came in and took James Bruce out.

"Now, what about it?" Mordette asked heavily. "What made him break like that?"

"This," said Calder. He held up the paper so that they could both see what had been carefully written on it.



"What does it mean?" Mordette asked.

"That's the formula for the door he made," Jair said. "It's the same as the regular formula except for a slight difference which lowers its softening point. You see, Plexilite is a polymethyl methacrylate plastic, sometimes known as the plastic with a memory. In other words, it can be molded into one form and then, if you heat it, it will immediately revert to its original form."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Everything. You see, Mr. Bruce made the door exactly like the regular door, except that in molding it he put into the door an old-fashioned keyhole — something which hasn't been used in a hundred years. He also molded a key to fit it and so was able to unlock and lock the door."

"But what happened to the keyhole and the key?"

"Cooerl II," Jair Calder said. "The call to the Mercurian was a plan to get him to pass along the hallway just after the murder. In doing so, he raised the temperature to about two hundred degrees centigrade — not warm enough to bother the other doors, but enough to make this one door 'remember' its original form, which was a door without a key-hole. And the key, which he'd dropped on the floor, became this." Jair reached into his pocket and

held up the small figure he'd picked up earlier. "What looks like etching is where he filed the key. In reverting, the filed edges were inside."

"The clue on the paper."

"Part of it," said Jair. "Gru must have guessed when he saw his murderer and tried to write down the formula, or part of it. The six-sided figure he drew was probably part of the chemical symbol for the reaction between phenol and formaldehyde — that being what Bruce added and which he purchased here in the hotel. The *COO* was undoubtedly part of the formula I've written here."

"But why?"

"Plastics," the inspector said. "Mr. Gru had made an appointment with a patent attorney concerning something he was going to call Ancolite. On the scratch pad upstairs was part of a formula which the murderer overlooked. Not the complete formula, but enough to be interesting." He pulled the slip of paper from his pocket and unfolded the section which earlier he'd folded back. He read from it. "'CO-Two A-N-O plus Si-O-Two plus C-six-H-five-O-H.' It's enough to indicate that Mr. Gru had apparently found a way to make a plastic primarily from air. This might easily put Plasticorp out of business."

"But —" began the manager.

(Continued on page 77)

The reformers' main trouble is a blind spot when it comes to simple pragmatism. They know how to save the world, to save mankind from destruction, to save ten dollars a week against a rainy day. What they lack is actual experience. No man can expect to know how hard it is to save money when he's never had to fight like the devil to get his hands on a dime.

That's why Miguel wasn't impressed by all the fine talk this big-shot gringo was handing out. Anybody can swear off water when he's not dry as an old bone. Sort of "He laughs at scars who never felt a wound." But Miguel was no idiot. He knew you can't argue with a man who intends to kill you, if necessary, to save your life!



Illustrator: Dick Francis



OR ELSE

By HENRY KUTTNER

MIGUEL and Fernandez were shooting inaccurately at each other across the valley when the flying saucer landed. They wasted a few bullets on the strange airship. The pilot appeared and began to walk across the valley and up the slope toward Miguel, who lay in the uncertain shade of a cholla swearing and working the bolt of his rifle as rapidly as he

could. His aim, never good, grew worse as the stranger approached. Finally, at the last minute, Miguel dropped his rifle, seized the machete beside him, and sprang to his feet.

"Die, then," he said, and swung the blade. The steel blazed in the hot Mexican sun. The machete rebounded elastically from the stranger's neck and flew high in

the air, while Miguel's arm tingled as though from an electric shock. A bullet came from across the valley, making the kind of sound a wasp's sting might make if you were hearing it instead of feeling it. Miguel dropped and rolled into the shelter of a large rock. Another bullet shrieked thinly, and a brief blue flash sparkled on the stranger's left shoulder.

"*Estoy perdido,*" Miguel said, giving himself up for lost. Flat on his stomach, he lifted his head and snarled at his enemy.

The stranger, however, made no inimical moves. Moreover, he seemed to be unarmed. Miguel's sharp eyes searched him. The man was unusually dressed. He wore a cap made of short, shiny blue feathers. Under it his face was hard, ascetic and intolerant. He was very thin and nearly seven feet tall. But he did seem to be unarmed. That gave Miguel courage. He wondered where his machete had fallen. He did not see it, but his rifle was only a few feet away.

The stranger came up and stood above Miguel.

"Stand up," he said. "Let us talk."

He spoke excellent Spanish, except that his voice seemed to be coming from inside Miguel's head.

"I will not stand up," Miguel said. "If I stand up, Fernandez will shoot me. He is a very bad shot, but I would be a fool to take

such a chance. Besides, this is very unfair. How much is Fernandez paying you?"

The stranger looked austerely at Miguel. "Do you know where I came from?" he asked.

"I don't care a *centavo* where you came from," Miguel said, wiping sweat from his forehead. He glanced toward a nearby rock where he had cached a goatskin of wine. "From *los estados unidos*, no doubt, you and your machine of flight. The Mexican government will hear of this."

"Does the Mexican government approve of murder?"

"This is a private matter," Miguel said. "A matter of water rights, which are very important. Besides, it is self-defense. That *cabron* across the valley is trying to kill me. And you are his hired assassin. God will punish you both." A new thought came to him. "How much will you take to kill Fernandez?" he inquired. "I will give you three *pesos* and a fine kid."

"There will be no more fighting at all," the stranger said. "Do you hear that?"

"Then go and tell Fernandez," Miguel said. "Inform him that the water rights are mine. I will gladly allow him to go in peace." His neck ached from staring up at the tall man. He moved a little, and a bullet shrieked through the still, hot air and dug with a vicious splash into a nearby cactus.

The stranger smoothed the blue feathers on his head. "First I will finish talking with you. Listen to me, Miguel."

"How do you know my name?" Miguel demanded, rolling over and sitting up cautiously behind the rock. "It is as I thought. Fernandez has hired you to assassinate me."

"I know your name because I can read your mind a little. Not much, because it is so cloudy."

"Your mother was a dog," Miguel said.

The stranger's nostrils pinched together slightly, but he ignored the remark. "I come from another world," he said. "My name is—" In Miguel's mind it sounded like Quetzalcoatl.

"Quetzalcoatl?" Miguel repeated, with fine irony. "Oh, I have no doubt of that. And mine is Saint Peter, who has the keys to Heaven."

Quetzalcoatl's thin, pale face flushed slightly, but his voice was determinedly calm. "Listen, Miguel. Look at my lips. They are not moving. I am speaking inside your head, by telepathy, and you translate my thoughts into words that have meaning to you. Evidently my name is too difficult for you. Your own mind has translated it as Quetzalcoatl. That is not my real name at all."

"*De veras*," Miguel said. "It is not your name at all, and you do not come from another world. I

would not believe a *norteamericano* if he swore on the bones of ten thousand highly-placed saints."

Quetzalcoatl's long, austere face flushed again.

"I am here to give orders," he said. "Not to bandy words with—look here, Miguel. Why do you suppose you couldn't kill me with your machete? Why can't bullets touch me?"

"Why does your machine of flight fly?" Miguel riposted. He took out a sack of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. He squinted around the rock. "Fernandez is probably trying to creep up on me. I had better get my rifle."

"Leave it alone," Quetzalcoatl said. "Fernandez will not harm you."

Miguel laughed harshly.

"And you must not harm him," Quetzalcoatl added firmly.

"I will, then, turn the other cheek," Miguel said, "so that he can shoot me through the side of my head. I will believe Fernandez wishes peace, *Señor* Quetzalcoatl, when I see him walking across the valley with his hands over his head. Even then I will not let him come close, because of the knife he wears down his back."

Quetzalcoatl smoothed his blue steel feathers again. His bony face was frowning. "You must stop fighting forever, both of you," he said. "My race polices the universe and our responsibility is to

bring peace to every planet we visit."

"It is as I thought," Miguel said with satisfaction. "You come from *los estados unidos*. Why do you not bring peace to your own country? I have seen *los señores* Humphrey Bogart and Edward Robinson in *las películas*. Why, all over *Nueva York* gangsters shoot at each other from one skyscraper to another. And what do you do about it? You dance all over the place with *la señora* Betty Grable. Ah yes, I understand very well. First you will bring peace, and then you will take our oil and our precious minerals."

Quetzalcoatl kicked angrily at a pebble beside his shiny steel toe. "I must make you understand," he said. He looked at the unlighted cigarette dangling from Miguel's lips. Suddenly he raised his hand and a white-hot ray shot from a ring on his finger and kindled the end of the cigarette. Miguel jerked away, startled. Then he inhaled the smoke and nodded. The white-hot ray disappeared.

"*Muchas gracias, señor,*" Miguel said.

Quetzalcoatl's colorless lips pressed together thinly. "Miguel," he said, "could a *norteamericano* do that?"

"*Quién sabe?*"

"No one living on your planet could do that, and you know it."

Miguel shrugged.

"Do you see that cactus over there?" Quetzalcoatl demanded. "I could destroy it in two seconds."

"I have no doubt of it, *señor.*"

"I could, for that matter, destroy this whole planet."

"Yes, I have heard of the atomic bombs," Miguel said politely. "Why, then, do you trouble to interfere with a quite private little argument between Fernandez and me, over a small water-hole of no importance to anybody but —"

A bullet sang past.

Quetzalcoatl rubbed the ring on his finger with an angry gesture.

"Because the world is going to stop fighting," he said ominously. "If it doesn't, we will destroy it. There is no reason at all why men should not live together in peace and brotherhood."

"There is one reason, *señor.*"

"What is that?"

"Fernandez," Miguel said.

"I will destroy you both if you do not stop fighting."

"*El señor* is a great peacemaker," Miguel said courteously. "I will gladly stop fighting if you will tell me how to avoid being killed when I do."

"Fernandez will stop fighting too."

Miguel removed his somewhat battered sombrero, reached for a stick and carefully raised the hat above the rock. There was a nasty crack. The hat jumped away and Miguel caught it as it fell.

"Very well," he said. "Since you insist, *señor*, I will stop fighting. But I will not come out from behind this rock. I am perfectly willing to stop fighting. But it seems to me that you demand I do something which you do not tell me how to do. You could as well require that I fly through the air like your machine of flight."

Quetzalcoatl frowned more deeply. Finally he said, "Miguel, tell me how this fight started."

"Fernandez wishes to kill me and enslave my family."

"Why should he want to do that?"

"Because he is evil," Miguel said.

"How do you know he is evil?"

"Because," Miguel pointed out logically, "he wishes to kill me and enslave my family."

There was a pause. A road-runner darted past and paused to peck at the gleaming barrel of Miguel's rifle. Miguel sighed.

"There is a skin of good wine not twenty feet away—" he began, but Quetzalcoatl interrupted him.

"What was it you said about the water rights?"

"Oh, that," Miguel said. "This is a poor country, *señor*. Water is precious here. We have had a dry year and there is no longer water enough for two families. The water hole is mine. Fernandez wishes to kill me and enslave —"

"Are there no courts of law in your country?"

"For such as us?" Miguel demanded, and smiled politely.

"Has Fernandez a family too?" Quetzalcoatl asked.

"Yes, the poors," Miguel said. "He beats them when they do not work until they drop."

"Do you beat your family?"

"Only when they need it," Miguel said, surprised. "My wife is very fat and lazy. And my oldest, Chico, talks back. It is my duty to beat them when they need it, for their own good. It is also my duty to protect our water rights, since the evil Fernandez is determined to kill me and —"

Quetzalcoatl said impatiently, "This is a waste of time. Let me consider." He rubbed the ring on his finger again. He looked around. The road-runner had found a more appetizing morsel than the rifle. He was now to be seen trotting away with the writhing tail of a lizard dangling from his beak.

Overhead, the sun was hot in a clear blue sky. The dry air smelled of mesquite. Below, in the valley, the flying saucer's perfection of shape and texture looked incongruous and unreal.

"Wait here," Quetzalcoatl said at last. "I will talk to Fernandez. When I call, come to my machine of flight. Fernandez and I will meet you there presently."

"As you say, *señor*," Miguel agreed. His eyes strayed.

"And do not touch your rifle," Quetzalcoatl added, with great firmness.

"Why, no, *señor*," Miguel said. He waited until the tall man had gone. Then he crawled cautiously across the dry ground until he had recaptured his rifle. After that, with a little searching, he found his machete. Only then did he turn to the skin of wine. He was very thirsty indeed. But he did not drink heavily. He put a full clip in the rifle, leaned against a rock and sipped a little from time to time from the wineskin as he waited.

In the meantime the stranger, ignoring fresh bullets that occasionally splashed blue from his steely person, approached Fernandez' hiding place. The sound of shots stopped. A long time passed, and finally the tall form reappeared and waved to Miguel.

"*Ya voy, señor*," Miguel shouted agreeably. He put his rifle conveniently on the rock and rose very cautiously, ready to duck at the first hostile move. There was no such move.

Fernandez appeared beside the stranger. Immediately Miguel bent down, seized his rifle and lifted it for a snap shot.

Something thin and hissing burned across the valley. The rifle turned red-hot in Miguel's grasp. He squealed and dropped it, and the next moment his mind went perfectly blank.

"I die with honor," he thought, and then thought no more.

When he woke, he was standing under the shadow of the great flying saucer. Quetzalcoatl was lowering his hand from before Miguel's face. Sunlight sparkled on the tall man's ring. Miguel shook his head dizzily.

"I live?" he inquired.

But Quetzalcoatl paid no attention. He had turned to Fernandez who was standing beside him, and was making gestures before Fernandez's mask-like face. A light flashed from Quetzalcoatl's ring into Fernandez's glassy eyes. Fernandez shook his head and muttered thickly. Miguel looked for his rifle or machete, but they were gone. He slipped his hand into his shirt, but his good little knife had vanished too.

He met Fernandez' eyes.

"We are both doomed, Don Fernandez," he said. "This *señor* Quetzalcoatl will kill us both. In a way, I am sorry that you will go to hell and I to heaven, for we shall not meet again."

"You are mistaken," Fernandez replied, vainly searching for his own knife. "You will never see heaven. Nor is this tall *norteamericano* named Quetzalcoatl. For his own lying purposes he has assumed the name of Cortés."

"You will tell lies to the devil himself," Miguel said.

"Be quiet, both of you," Quet-

zalcoatl (or Cortés) said sharply. "You have seen a little of my power. Now listen to me. My race has assumed the high duty of seeing that the entire solar system lives in peace. We are a very advanced race, with power such as you do not yet dream of. We have solved problems which your people have no answer for, and it is now our duty to apply our power for the good of all. If you wish to keep on living, you will stop fighting immediately and forever, and from now on live in peace and brotherhood. Do you understand me?"

"That is all I have ever wished," Fernandez said, shocked. "But this offspring of a goat wishes to kill me."

"There will be no more killing," Quetzalcoatl said. "You will live in brotherhood, or die."

Miguel and Fernandez looked at each other — at Quetzalcoatl.

"The *señor* is a great peacemaker," Miguel murmured. "I have said it before. The way you mention is surely the best way of all to insure peace. But to us it is not so simple. To live in peace is good. Very well, *señor*. Tell us how."

"Simply stop fighting."

"Now that is easy to say," Fernandez pointed out. "But life here in Sonora is not a simple business. Perhaps it is where you come from —"

"Naturally," Miguel put in.

"— but it is not simple with us. Perhaps in your country, *señor*, the snake does not eat the rat and the bird eat the snake. Perhaps in your country there is food and water for all, and a man need not fight to keep his family alive. Here it is not so simple."

Miguel nodded. "We shall certainly all be brothers some day," he agreed.

"You must not use force to solve your problems," Quetzalcoatl said with great firmness. "Force is evil. *You will make peace now.*"

"Or else you will destroy us," Miguel said. He shrugged again and met Fernandez' eyes. "Very well, *señor*. You have an argument I do not care to resist. *Al fin*, I agree. What must we do?"

Quetzalcoatl turned to Fernandez.

"I too, *señor*," the latter said with a sigh. "You are no doubt right. Let us have peace."

"You will take hands," Quetzalcoatl said, his eyes gleaming. "You will swear brotherhood."

Miguel held out his hand. Fernandez took it firmly and the two men grinned at each other.

"You see?" Quetzalcoatl said, giving them his austere smile. "It is not hard at all. Now you are friends. Stay friends."

He turned away and walked toward the flying saucer. A door opened smoothly in the sleek hull.

On the threshold Quetzalcoatl turned. He said. "I shall be watching."

"Without a doubt," Fernández said. "Adiós, señor."

"Vaya con Dios," Miguel added.

The smooth surface of the hull closed after Quetzalcoatl. A moment later the flying saucer lifted smoothly and rose until it was a hundred feet above the ground. Then it shot off to the north like a sudden flash of lightning and was gone.

"As I thought," Miguel said. "He was from *los estados unidos*."

Fernandez shrugged. "There was a moment when I thought he might tell us something sensible," he said. "No doubt he had great wisdom. Truly, life is not easy."

"Oh, it is easy enough for him," Miguel said. "But he does not live in Sonora. We, however, do. Fortunately, I and my family have a water hole to rely on. For those without one, life is hard."

"It is a very poor water hole," Fernandez said. "Such as it is, however, it is mine." He was rolling a cigarette as he spoke. He handed it to Miguel and rolled another for himself. The two men smoked for a while in silence. Then, still silent, they parted.

Miguel went back to the wine-skin on the hill. He took a long drink, grunted with pleasure, and looked around him. His knife, machete and rifle were carelessly

flung down not far away. He recovered them and made sure he had a full clip.

Then he peered cautiously around the rock barricade. A bullet splashed on the stone near his face. He returned the shot.

After that, there was silence for awhile. Miguel sat back and took another drink. His eye was caught by a road-runner scuttling past, with the tail of a lizard dangling from his beak. It was probably the same road-runner as before, and perhaps the same lizard, slowly progressing toward digestion.

Miguel called softly, "Señor. Bird! It is wrong to eat lizards."

The road-runner cocked a beady eye at him and ran on.

Miguel raised and aimed his rifle. "Stop eating lizards, Señor Bird. Stop, or I must kill you."

The road-runner ran on across the rifle-sights.

"Don't you understand how to stop?" Miguel called gently. "Must I explain how?"

The road-runner paused. The tail of the lizard disappeared completely.

"Oh, very well," Miguel said. "When I find out how a road-runner can stop eating lizards and still live, then I will tell you, *amigo*. But until then, go with God."

He turned and aimed the rifle across the valley again.

THE CLOSED DOOR

(Continued from page 67)

"Exactly," said Inspector Calder. "James Bruce committed murder in order to save his corporation. But it was a wasted effort. I must turn this paper over to the government of Sirius 11 and they probably have a chemist who can reconstruct the formula. You see," he added turned to the sub-inspector, "you were quite wrong about nothing having changed in the past two hundred years. This was a crime which could not have happened then.

"Which," he continued, "brings us up to the point that James Bruce will, according to law,

have to be tried on Sirius 11. I'll write a supplementary report, but you'll have to file the main report. And I have no doubt that Mr. Bruce will be found guilty. After which, perhaps, there'll be some action against Plasticorp."

"One thing puzzles me," said Mordette, still finding something to worry him. "I've had no experience with this sort of thing. How shall I make the charge? The victim wasn't a man, so homicide seems somehow wrong."

"Of course it is," Inspector Jair Calder said briskly. "The proper charge is silicide." He waved to the two men and walked out, once more looking sleepy.

They waved back.

DREAM OF VICTORY

(Continued from page 50)

hell out of here!" She picked up a bookend. "You're insane!"

Fuoss picked up the Scotch bottle from the table beside the door and broke the end off over the table's corner. He laughed. "Yeah."

Tal Cummins came briskly down the corridor between the cells. He was sweating, and his hair was not combed.

"There he is. You want to go in there?" The turnkey had stopped at Fuoss's cell.

"No, thanks." Cummins leaned

forward and looked at Fuoss. "Stac?"

Fuoss looked up.

"You realize what you've done?" Cummins was suddenly shouting, waving the full-color newspaper in his hand. "You're all over the papers. The public's going crazy for your blood. You realize what you've done to the whole android re-establishment program?"

Fuoss got up and put his face close to Cummins. He looked into the lawyer's eyes. His hands wrapped around the bars.

"Is she dead?" he asked hopefully. He turned from the lawyer and did not look at him again.

NEVER



GO BACK

By CHARLES V. DE VET

You've heard the story about the man who moved back through time and murdered his own grandfather? Well, don't worry; this isn't it! So many yarns are variations on this theme that it has become a science-fiction cliche. In fact, most time-travel stories are pretty much an old-hat routine these days, and editors flinch whenever they run into one.

Which is why we flinched when Charles DeVet tossed the ms. of Never Go Back on our desk. But because we have a fine large admiration for his ability, we swallowed our qualms (they're mint-flavored) and read what, on the surface, promised to be just one more tired tale of time travel. That our fears were groundless is evidenced by the fact that the story is proudly presented in these pages.

SUCCESS! He had returned! But as he stood with the warm rain splashing against his shoulders and running sluggishly down his naked body, the feeling of triumph he should have felt was dulled and numbed by a presentiment of disaster. Unease, tinged with a sense of horror, centered at the pit of his stomach like a lead weight. An aura of sourceless despair seemed to surround him. He felt it reach for him.

There was just enough light to make out, vaguely, the features of the old deserted house in front of him.

He must not be found here without clothes, he thought, as he walked around the wing of the house. His legs felt heavy and he had to lift them with an obvious effort. It was as though the night air had become viscous and clung to his legs.

The second window was unlatched, as he had expected. He raised it and crawled through.

Groping carefully in the dark, dim mists of

memory returned as he felt remembered pieces of furniture scattered about the room. In the downstairs bedroom he found the old iron bed still standing in its corner. Ripping a tattered curtain from one of the windows, he wiped himself dry.

He lay on the bed and curled up to sleep. The summer night was warm and the old house still held its trapped heat. He'd need no blankets.

This was the same bed his grandfather had died in months before, but it gave him no feeling of unrest to sleep here. He had always liked his grandfather, and the liking had been returned.

The bed had a faint odor of mold and mustiness.

Sometime toward morning Meissner awoke. Coolness had crept into the house and he was too uncomfortable to go back to sleep. Through the window at his head he saw the first light of breaking dawn.

He rose and rubbed his body vigorously to bring warmth back into the flesh. Then he left the bedroom, went through the dining room, and up the stairway to the second floor.

In one of the clothes-closets off the hall he found a shirt, a pair of trousers — slightly too large for him — and shoes. There were no stockings but the pants came down low on his legs and probably

no one would notice. In one of the trouser pockets he found a half-dollar. This was an unexpected bit of luck and, for a moment, it lifted the black depression that still rode his spirits like a cloak.

When his grandfather had died, Meissner remembered, the house had been left pretty much as it was for almost a year. Now and then some one of his children — all of them married — would drop in and pick up something he wanted. But it was a year before the house was completely cleaned out and sold.

Meissner waited until broad daylight before venturing outside. He had not walked far before he recognized two men coming toward him.

"Good morning, Mr. van Immortal. And Mr. Plucker," Meissner said, as they met.

The men looked at him in surprise and grunted noncommittal replies. This would never do, Meissner reflected. Too much familiarity with his surroundings could easily lead to trouble. He must keep his identity secret at all costs.

At the Busy Bee Meissner had wheat cakes and coffee. He took his time eating them, waiting for the business district of the small town to come to life. In the meantime he glanced at the calendar and verified the date. July 8, 1933. Becker had done a good job in figuring when he would appear

again in his trip into the past. He should be in time to save Norbert Kerl's life.

At a quarter to nine he left the Busy Bee and walked over to the school grounds. And now the first excitement of expectation ran through him like a live current — but mingled with it was the ever-present dread. He wished he could put his finger on the reason for that dread.

In a few minutes he should be able to see himself as he had been twenty years earlier. What would his sensations be as he watched himself playing in the school yard?

Most of the children were already out on the grounds, playing a game called pump-pump-pull-away. He had almost forgotten that game, but it had been very popular in his youth.

For five minutes Meissner watched, but saw no signs of his former self. However, he recognized one of the smaller boys as Norbert Kerl.

Primarily, he had come back out of scientific curiosity, to see if the medium he and Becker had devised would work. However, in picking a date he had decided on July 8, 1933. That was the date young Kerl had drowned in the old stone pit. And, incidental as it was to the main purpose of his journey, Meissner wanted to prevent that tragedy, if at all possi-

ble.

He did not know how long it would be before he snapped back into the future. Perhaps he would not have time to prevent Kerl from going to the swimming hole, so he decided to scare him away somehow. He walked nearer to where the boys were playing. "Norbert," he called, "will you come here a minute?"

"Yeah?" Kerl asked as he ran over.

"How's the water in the old swimming hole?" Meissner asked.

"Pretty good," Kerl answered, looking at him questioningly.

"I was over there the other day," Meissner said. "And I saw a mother copperhead with fourteen young ones swimming around. That's going to be a dangerous place to swim for awhile."

"Copperheads?" Kerl asked. "They're poison, ain't they?"

"A bite from one of them will kill you in ten minutes," Meissner told him. "I wouldn't go near there for a long time if I were you."

"I won't," Kerl said. "Thanks." He shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I got to go back and play now."

"Just a minute," Meissner said, before Kerl could leave. "Where is little Art Meissner now? I don't see him playing."

"I don't know him."

"Oh, sure you do," Meissner said. "He's about your size. Dark hair. You play with him a lot."

"There ain't no kid here by that name," Kerl answered. He ran back to the other children.

No kid here by that name! The dreariness that had been gnawing at Meissner's vitals became a cry of agony. He remembered the school, and the children — though he had forgotten most of their names — and everything he saw around him. He, in his youth, had to be there somewhere. He decided to take the risk of talking to his old teacher.

"Miss Gallagher," Meissner said, "I'm looking for a boy by the name of Arthur Meissner. I understand he's in your class."

"No, I'm afraid not," Miss Gallagher replied. "There's no boy by that name in school. There is a George Meissner in the eighth grade; but he has no brothers."

George Meissner was his older brother. The feeling was worse now. She had said that George had no brothers. That wasn't possible.

"Well, thank —" the words caught in Meissner's throat and he turned and stumbled blindly out of the room.

Something was wrong here — terribly wrong. But he had to be absolutely certain that he was making no mistake. He started determinedly down the street.

At the end of three blocks Meissner came to the large, square house where he had lived as a boy. His mother should be home now.

It wouldn't do to blurt out that he had come from the future and that he was her son, he decided. Especially now that there was a mystery here that he must clear up. He'd have to think up some plausible story to use while he talked to her. He rang the bell.

"Yes?" The woman who answered was younger than Meissner had remembered. She was younger than he. Yet, she was unmistakably his mother. Her face and figure already bore the signs of hard work's molding. She had always worked hard, he remembered.

"I'm Mr. Anderson," Meissner said. "I've been hired by the board of education to conduct a survey of parents with children in school. You have two, have you not, Mrs. Meissner?"

"I have only one child," the woman said, drying her hands on the dish towel she carried. "His name is George, and he's in the eighth grade."

The crying inside became worse and Meissner could no longer hold it inside. "Mother," he cried, "don't you recognize me? I'm your son!"

The woman looked alarmed, and instantly Meissner realized how grave a misstep he had made. Here he was, a man older than she, claiming to be her son. "I'm afraid I can't talk any longer," the woman said. She was clearly frightened now.

"Please, just one more question," Meissner begged. "You're positive that you do not have a son by the name of Arthur?"

"Yes," she said and closed the door quickly.

Meissner spent the afternoon at the old swimming hole. He did not think it wise to remain around town. Probably by now his mother had spread an alarm about a queer-acting man. The townspeople would undoubtedly think him insane. Perhaps they would even arrest him. Further, he wanted to be certain that young Kerl did not visit the swimming hole that day. As he remembered, Kerl had drowned at about four-thirty in the afternoon.

The day was warm and Meissner lay in the cool shade of a willow tree. Overhead a bird chirped cheerfully, and Meissner knew that ordinarily he should have felt peaceful and relaxed on a day like this. But his nerves were taut as stretched wires, and his emotions were those of a man sentenced to die. All day long a dog howled dismally off in the distance.

When dusk came Meissner knew that at least he had managed to prevent Kerl's drowning — on that day anyway. He started back for his grandfather's house.

Becker had estimated that Meissner would spend about twenty-four hours in past time

before he snapped back into the future. His analogy had been that it would be like a rubber band, snapping twenty years into the past, where it would pause — for the time he would be able to spend there — before it began its return journey. Becker had not been able to estimate it exactly.

Meissner opened the door of his grandfather's house and felt himself snatched as in a giant hand and whisked out of time and space.

When Meissner returned he found himself standing in the dim light of early dawn. But where was Becker, he wondered. Becker was supposed to be waiting for him. And when he was not able to be here, he was to have left a change of clothing for Meissner. There was none to be seen.

Becker had not been able to estimate the exact time he would return. He had only been able to conclude that it would be a bit beyond the time Meissner had started. His rubber band would snap him back and its momentum would carry him a bit beyond his original starting point. Probably about a week into the future. That would give Becker plenty of time to make arrangements for his return. But there was no one here.

Perhaps Becker had underestimated the time, Meissner thought. Or perhaps he had returned to a time before he started. But then he would have met him-

self again before he left. More likely Becker had miscalculated and he had gone farther into the future than Becker had judged. But even so Becker should be waiting, or he should have left some sign that Meissner would recognize.

Meissner shrugged. Whatever the explanation, he couldn't afford to be caught here without clothes. He turned down an alley that ran to his left. A third of the way down the alley he saw a shirt and a pair of overalls hanging on a line. Slipping into the back yard, Meissner pulled the clothes off the line and put them on.

He was just fastening the last button on the shirt when he heard the clink of milk bottles. Then a shout. "What are you doing there?" a man's sleepy voice called. Meissner ran, but the man followed, shouting, "Stop! Come back with those clothes!"

Meissner increased his pace. He'd begun to outdistance the man when he stubbed his bare toe on a rock and fell.

His hands scraped along the cinders, and one knee tore through the leg of the overalls. He almost lost out then, but he climbed quickly to his feet and sprinted around the corner.

Meissner knew now where he'd go to hide. The Chicago and Minneapolis railroad tracks ran through a gully about six blocks away. The sides of the gully were

overgrown with Indian coffee bushes and weeds. Meissner had lost his pursuer now. At least he heard no sounds of him.

Once down in the gully, he crawled into the thickest bushes and lay down.

He was more tired than he had suspected; and he was thirsty, but he dared not leave. The man from whom he had stolen the clothing might still be looking for him. Soon sleep swept away his troubles and he dozed for the remainder of the forenoon.

Sometime during the afternoon Meissner awoke and his mouth was pinched with a tight and dry sourness. His whole body ached and protested against his every move. He placed the back of his hand against his forehead and it was hot and feverish. He knew he had to have food and water soon.

It should be safe to venture out now, he decided. If the man — or the police — were looking for him, and caught him, he could call Becker. There would be some explanations necessary, but probably no great danger of detention.

"Good God, don't tell me you don't know me either?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Doctor Becker said, "but to the best of my knowledge I've never seen you before in my life."

"But you must have!" Meissner's voice was high and unsteady. "I'm Arthur Meissner. You and I

discovered the secret of travelling in time! I went back to my childhood, and now I've returned. You must remember me!"

"Are you sure that you feel well?"

"Of course I do," Meissner exclaimed. "Why won't you admit that you know me? You're like the others in the past. They insisted that nobody like me had ever lived there. Even my mother denied me." His voice lost its tenseness and sank to a gray hopelessness. "Now, if you don't know me, I don't know what I'll do." His knees trembled, and he leaned his hand against the door for support. A flash of fever coursed through his body and burned into his eyes.

"If there's something I can do . . ."

"No, it seems not," Meissner said tonelessly. He turned to go, but his knees sagged slowly beneath him and he slumped to the doorstep.

"At last you've come around," Becker said. "I was a bit worried about you." He felt Meissner's wrist. "Your pulse has slowed down some, but your fever is as high as ever. I fail to find evidence of anything wrong with you, though, except for the scratches on your knees and hands."

Meissner spoke eagerly. "Tell me, Doctor," he said, "and please — please don't joke. You do re-

member me, don't you?"

Becker shook his head.

"But then, what's happened to me? Why doesn't anybody know me?"

"Take this sedative, please," Becker said. "You need more rest. After you sleep we'll talk again."

This time when Meissner awoke he felt better, and his head was clear. His fever still burned, but it did not affect his thinking.

Becker must have heard him moving, for he entered the bedroom almost immediately. "How are you feeling now?" he asked.

"Some better, I guess," Meissner replied. "I suppose you think I'm crazy?"

"No. But your high fever has induced some strange hallucinations. I hope you've managed to rid yourself of them."

"Doctor," Meissner said earnestly, "I want you to do me a favor. Just pretend — at least until I've told you my story — that you don't think I'm crazy or have hallucinations. Think and act as if what I'm going to tell you could have happened. Will you do that?"

"Of course," Becker answered. "Go right ahead."

"All right. To start with, my name is Arthur Meissner. Six years ago I met a man by the name of Walter Becker. This was not a coincidence. Becker was a physicist; one of the best in the

country. I, on the other hand, was an amateur, working along unusual lines of somatology. The story is long, but its essential feature is that I had an idea for building a time machine and, with Becker's help and scientific knowledge, succeeded.

"I went back twenty years into time, to my youth. And when I arrived I found that I had never existed there—even though I remembered everything I saw. Now, when I return here, I find that you know nothing about me, or our experiments. Can you possibly give me any explanation?"

Becker was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "The Becker you refer to, I presume, is supposed to be me. You say that he was a famous physicist. I am a medical doctor! So, if I were to grant that your story is true, are you certain that I'm the man you're looking for?"

"Positive. You're not only identical, but you live in this same house. I've spent many hours with you, working in your laboratory in the basement."

"I have a woodshop in the basement," Becker said, "but no laboratory.

"I have thought over everything you told me," Becker said. "I've considered it objectively, as you asked. Strangely enough, I believe you. Or at least I'm convinced that you're sincere. Why don't you bathe and shave, if you

feel well enough, and after you're through we can talk again."

"A good idea." Messiner rose and walked into the bathroom. He looked into the looking glass and was startled at his reflection. His bitter experience had done ghastly things to him. He would hardly have recognized himself. His face seemed bloated and puffed, his brows were heavier, and his whiskers were black and tough as steel barbs. He shaved with difficulty. But after it was over he did feel better.

"Now," Becker said, after they'd seated themselves, "acting on the assumption that your story is true, I've arrived at an answer to the mystery of what happened to you. Naturally, I can give you no assurance that it is the correct one, but it is an explanation, and may help you get peace of mind, if nothing else."

Meissner sat up straighter. "Go ahead," he said.

"Nature," Becker continued, "has certain immutable laws which cannot be defied with impunity. True, science is finding new truths every day, and finding that the old accepted beliefs are wrong. However," Becker paused while he searched for the exact words he wanted, "certain truths and laws are inviolable by their own intrinsic necessity. To use an example, you've probably heard the old saw about what happens

when an irresistible force strikes an immovable object. Theoretically at least, it is possible to have an irresistible force. And it is just as possible to have an immovable object. But it is not possible to have both. If the force is irresistible, it will move any object. If, on the other hand, the object is immovable, no force will be able to move it.

"Another immutable law of nature is this: No two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. You may have heard that stated before?"

"I believe I have," Meissner answered. "But what does that have to do with what's happened to me?"

"I'm coming to that," Becker said. "If you travelled backward in time as you claim, you attempted to violate a law of nature which may be regarded as a corollary of the axiom that no two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time. The one you violated is one so self-evident that it's probably never been defined by an axiom. It may be stated as: no object, undivided, can occupy more than one unit of space at one time."

"Are you trying to tell me that I could not exist — at the same time — both as a youth and as an adult?"

"Yes," Becker answered. "You see, you yourself are the object in this particular instance, and by

going back into time you — the same object — would be occupying two separate units of space at the same time. Which is axiomatically impossible. Therefore, nature made its adjustment; the same as it would if an irresistible force hit a so-called immovable object. It eliminates one of them. It did the same when it eliminated your past."

"I see, rather vaguely, what you mean," Meissner said. "But why, then, don't you remember me, now that I'm back?"

"But don't you see, the things you expect me to remember about you also happened in your past, and you wiped out all that by your violation of one of nature's precepts. Therefore, the things you remember about your contacts with me never happened either."

"But then how can I be here at all? I shouldn't exist if I have no past."

"That," Becker said gravely, "has given me a great deal of thought. And I dread to put into words the conclusion I came to. I pray that I'm wrong."

That evening when Meissner entered the bathroom and looked into the mirror his reflection was awe-inspiring. The swelling in his face had puffed up his lips, and spread his nostrils, giving a flattened, apelike cast to his features. His beard had grown in surpris-

ingly fast; the whiskers had crept up closer to his eyes and down his neck until there was no break between the whisker line and the long hair on his chest. His eyebrows were heavier and longer, and his forehead appeared narrower.

The grimace he gave at the sight of his reflection drew his thick lips back into a snarl, and his eyeteeth stood out like fangs. His expression was entirely brutish.

That night Meissner was tossed by the fever and his whole body became one twitching, itching torment. He scratched continuously until he was sore and raw-fleshed in a dozen places.

When he could stand the misery no longer, he attempted to call to Becker. But his lips and tongue refused to form words, as though dulled by long disuse. At last he forced out a shout. "Becker! Becker!" he called hoarsely. "Help me!"

Becker entered at his second call, drawing his bathrobe about him. He looked at Meissner with grave concern, but without surprise.

"Can't you stop this god-awful itching?" Meissner asked. "It's driving me mad. I can't stand much more of it."

"I'll do what I can," Becker said. He went into the bathroom and returned quickly with a jar of ointment. "Can you take your

pajamas off by yourself?" he asked.

"I think so," Meissner answered. As he pulled his pajama top over his head Meissner looked down at his bare body. The skin was coarse tissued, gray and dead looking — except the patches of raw red flesh which he had scratched bare. When he touched the skin he felt a morbid chill — and yet it was dry and flaky.

"What's happened to me, Becker?" he asked, turning his bloodshot eyes up to the doctor. Suddenly, self-pity overcame him and he started to cry.

Obviously embarrassed, Becker did not speak. He avoided meeting Meissner's pleading, tearful look.

"For God's sake, if you know, tell me!" Meissner cried.

Becker drew in a deep breath. "I think I do know, Arthur," he said slowly. "Do you really want me to tell you?"

Meissner nodded, his voice muted by what he read in Becker's expression.

"Is your mind clear enough to understand everything I say?" Becker asked.

"It's not too clear," Meissner answered. "Things keep coming and going. Sometimes I'm not even sure who I am, or what I'm doing here."

"Do you remember the last time we talked — when you asked how you could exist at all if you



were a man without a past?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"Then I think you should have an explanation; at least what I believe it is. To give you this answer, I will have to be brutally frank. Maybe I'm wrong to tell you, but in all fairness, if you want it you shall have it."

Fear crawled along Meissner's skin like a live thing. He did not know what was coming, but he realized that whatever it was it would be terrible to hear. He stared at Becker with a helpless appeal, but said nothing.

"In past ages," Becker said, "inanimate matter in some way became impregnated with life force, and through the eons it moved, through its slow evolutionary process, to its present stage of development. The crux of your whole difficulty is that, according to nature, you should not be existing now, as you have no past, and therefore are not a result of that evolutionary process. You constitute a contradiction which must be remedied. It is moving now to eliminate the error you represent — by sending you back through that evolutionary process.

"If you remember, the last time you looked into a mirror your features were hairy and bestial. Now the hair has started to leave your body, and scales are taking its place. The twitching

and itching you feel on your skin is due to its cellular change."

Once again Becker paused and gazed pityingly at the man before him. "I know this is an awful thing to tell you," he said, "but, as I mentioned before, I believe you are entitled to hear it. Lord knows it cannot make your difficulty much worse than it is now."

Despite the shock of the doctor's words, small segments of reason still clung to Meissner's brain. "But that evolutionary process took millions of years. If what you say is true, why is the reverse going so swiftly?"

"Nature is hurrying to rectify its disorder. You are not only returning quickly, but I am certain that the rate of retrogression is one of a geometrically, rather than an arithmetically, increasing rate. In other words, if you started going back at the rate of — say, two thousand years a minute — the second minute you returned at the rate of four thousand years a minute; the third minute, eight thousand; the fourth, sixteen thousand; and so on. That's why I believe you do not have much longer to live. I wish to heaven there was some way I could help you. But I am powerless."

The sickness that had been gathering in Meissner's throat rose up and engulfed him in a great black mass of unconsciousness.

Sometime later awareness re-

turned to Meissner's conscious mind, spurred by the immediacy of a desire — a need — that could not be denied. He had to have water!

Arising from his bed he staggered into the bathroom and filled the wash bowl with water from its cold faucet. He buried his bald, gray, scaly head in the water and gulped in great swallows of the precious liquid.

But still his need was not satisfied. Straightening up from the bowl he let his myopic gaze wander about the room, until it rested on the bathtub. For a long moment he regarded it before the logic of its function became evident. Then he turned on both faucets of the tub, and crawled in. He did not remove the clothing he wore.

The warm water embosomed Meissner's throbbing body, and he felt a soft glow of tranquillity — his first peace and satisfaction since the start of his horrible ordeal. For short periods he immersed his head in the water, and while he held it there his limbs fluttered idly, with a placid quiescence. He was content.

With the contentment came a bestial cunning — and a bestial decision!

The thing that pulled itself from the tub bore little semblance to a human being. Its animal cunning directed it as it fumbled at

the catch on the medicine cabinet door — until it had solved the method of its opening.

It was quiet now. Quiet with the deceptive guile of a primitive thing. Among the bottles and implements in the medicine cabinet it found a pair of scissors. It clutched them like a dagger in its webbed hand and stood swaying slowly — back and forth.

During a long minute of indecision its gaze returned to the tub — with its lure of the water it needed — longingly. But its resolution returned to its stronger impellation — revenge — and soon its purpose was once again firmly fixed in mind.

It did not know why it must do this: that it was caught in the grasp of a psychological compulsion stronger than its elementary reasoning power. It only knew that it associated its pain with the being who had explained its cause. As such it must kill that being.

Slowly it dragged its gross body across the bathroom floor and out the door.

The evolutionary change in its tissues was an agonizing thing now. Its outer wrapping no longer merely twitched and itched. Rather, it writhed and cracked with the terrible abruptness of its structural changes. Blood ran sluggishly from the raw breaks in its lacerated flesh.

(Continued on page 161)



THE YOKEL

By WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

The time: 1987. The place: Florida. America is struggling back from the effects of World War III. It is a divided country now, with the big cities held by scientists and technicians, and with all rural sections overrun by ruthless gangs seeking plunder and the eventual conquest of the cities themselves.

Into this maelstrom comes Sam Wuncie, cynical, hard-bitten and with but one ambition: to stay alive. Circumstance puts him deep in the hands of the deadly Colonel MacMahon and the unfathomable Zella Richmond. It is from this strange pair that Sam eventually learns there is far more to life than keeping death at a distance.

No good science-fiction magazine should go to press without at least one exciting novelette crammed with action. Here's a pip!

HE STOOD in front of the dimly lighted saloon idly rolling a half dollar across the back of his knuckles, a dark young man in dirty overalls, unshaven and unkempt. He gazed with dull eyes at the gloomy street, debris-littered, with clogged sewers and rusting, flat-tired automobiles, with shabby loiterers and tallow lamps burning atop the electric streetlight standards. The small city, once of 15,000 population, had only recently gotten the tallow lamps. Progress, real progress.

A dame wandered past and he glanced at her indifferently — a frowsy tomato with glint-eyes and rag-hair. She saw the half dollar dancing across his skilled knuckles. She stopped.

"Got a light, Mister?" Her purring tone offered a proposition.

"Climb a light-pole, Sister. It's on the city."

She eyed the coin. "I've got change."

"Then use it to call a taxi. Scram."

She laughed; evidently it was a good joke. She gazed hungrily into the saloon and moistened her lips.

"Buy me a glass of swill, huh?"

"I wouldn't blow you the foam off my beer. Beat it, Gertie. Your time's used up. I'm a busy man."

She hissed an insult, spat at him, and darted away. He grumbled irritably and wiped the spittole out of his eyes. He dropped the half dollar in his pocket and shuffled into the bar. Customers were scarce. A rag-bag with a gray head was asleep on the floor; nobody bothered to pick it up. A gaunt young man with a festered neck and a blind eye was talking to himself at the bar. The sleazy wheezer who committed the drinks shuffled to meet the newcomer.

"Hi, Wuncie. Got dough?"

"Yeah, gimme a —"

"Show me."

Sam Wuncie cursed and jingled his pocket. "Wanna bite one to make sure?"

"Nah, I trust ya. Who'd you roll for it?"

"Picked beans for Gardland, Nosey. Gimme a drink."

"What'll you have?"

Wuncie glowered at him. "Frozen Daiquiri!" he snapped.

The bartender shrugged. "Just thought I'd ask. Wait'll I get the siphon."

There was a galvanized wash-tub set up on a box on the bar. Nosey dropped one end of a rubber hose in it and sucked on the other end. Then he pinched it off and stuck it in a glass. The glass filled slowly with a murky brown liquid.

"What's in this batch, Nosey? Bird nests?"

Nosey grinned reflectively. "Can't remember. Old Lady keeps six tubs working. Whatever she can get goes in."

Wuncie took the glass with a shudder and tossed Nosey a dime. He peered at the murky fluid distastefully. "You suck the hose and still live. Guess I'll chance it." He gulped the drink and made a face.

"Prunes. Damn rotten prunes."

"Don't like it, don't drink it," Nosey muttered irritably.

"I like it. It's a club."

"Have another?"

"Yeah."

"You're a real patriot, Wuncie," the bartender said as he came back with the glass. "A smart boy like you could cross

over and be drinking good liquor, eating good food, wearing decent clothes."

"Yeah, everybody's a real patriot," he answered sourly. "Everybody that can't pass the test and be a traitor."

"Nuts, you could pass, Wuncie. What'd you used to do before the war?"

"Dropped earthworms down little girls' backs."

"Just a kid, huh? Well — you could pass."

"The only place left to pass is out. Gimme another."

A man slipped quietly in the door, looked around quickly, then sidled onto a seat at the end of the bar. He was panting slightly, and his eyes were nervous. One cheek was covered with a patch bandage. Nosey approached him with a deepening frown. The customer showed him a handful of coins. Nosey shook his head.

"Lemme see under that patch first," he grunted. "It's on a bad spot, Joe."

The man looked stricken. "I — it's only a cut. Cut myself shaving."

"Take it off. Let me look."

The man licked his lips. "You got me wrong, Mister."

"Show me."

"Doc said not to lift it."

"Doc? For a shaving cut?"

The man slipped off the stool. Nosey reached for a butcher knife. The man backed toward the door.

"You got me wrong. I'm no crosser."

Nosey grasped the blade of the knife as if to throw it. The man yelped and fled. Nosey came back cursing.

"Cheek was branded, bigawd! The sneaky bastard!"

Wuncie's laugh was icy. "What were you saying about being tested?"

"I said you could pass. I didn't say you should."

"If I got tested and failed, would you run me off with a butcher knife?"

"Yer damned right I'd get after you!"

"That's what I meant. Everybody's a real patriot. Nobody wants to be tested. Patriotic reasons, of course."

"If you're going to tell me what's wrong with the world," Nosey growled, "it'll cost you a dime a minute."

— "It'll only take a second. *Brains* — that's what's wrong with the world."

"Huh? Whose — the committee's?" Nosey frowned and scratched his uncombed thatch.

"Nope, ours. We're freak animals, Nosey. We're like the goldfish with butterfly fins, or a saber-tooth tiger with fangs so long he can't open his mouth wide enough, or a deer with antlers so long they tangle in the brush. Nature overdid us, Nosey. A brain is a tool for survival, but she overdid it and

we got all bogged down in our own gray matter."

"You're getting tight, Wuncie."

"Yeah. And that's why. I've got about as much use for an active cortex as a baboon has for a blue behind." He shoved his glass across the bar. "Here, gimme the deactivator."

The bartender shrugged and reached for the siphon hose. He paused suddenly and glanced toward the door. There was a brief silence.

"Come in," he offered gruffly.

Three men stepped inside and stood peering around suspiciously in the dim lamplight. One of them carried a length of rope at his belt, and the rope was knotted into a noose. Another wore a long sheath-knife. The third carried a short joint of iron pipe.

One man went to look behind the bar. A second made a slow circuit of the saloon, opening every door for a glance inside. The third rolled the rag-bag over with his foot for a glance at his face. The rag-bag groaned.

"Go back to sleep, Pop."

The inspection was finished in silence. The man with the rope approached Nosey. "You seen a man with a bandage on his cheek lately?"

Nosey moistened his lips and glanced at Wuncie. Wuncie's smile was bitter, but cynically indifferent. The man with the rope

frowned impatiently and glanced at his aides.

"Reckon we should allow a blind barkeep to stay in business?"

They grinned and shook their heads.

"I think I saw him," Nosey sputtered hastily.

"You *think*? The hustler that works this street saw him come in here."

"Yeah, I saw him. I think it's the guy. Bandage on his cheek."

"Clever lad!" the ropeman said sarcastically. "What did he say? What did he do?"

"Tried to buy a drink. I saw the bandage and ran him off."

The ropeman nodded at his colleagues. "Doesn't know we've spotted him yet," he muttered.

They started outside, but the ropeman paused to look back at Wuncie. "Care to join us, Citizen?"

Wuncie gave the man a fishy stare, then turned to inspecting his nails.

"Citizen, I spoke to you."

"Yeah? Damn polite of you, bud. Noblesse oblige, I guess."

The ropeman hooked his thumbs in his belt and took two slow steps forward. "You sure are a smart boy! Maybe you're from the other side."

"Go buy your brain back, Mister!" Wuncie snarled. "If your butt's for sale, you'll need it."

The ropeman darkened. He glanced over his shoulder. "Hold

it a minute, boys. I got a live one."

The other men wandered back inside. They stood with hands on hips, watching with cold eyes. The ropeman leaned on the bar, staring hostilely at Sam. "What's your name, fellow?"

"Thaddeus Twench!" Sam snapped.

"Where you born?"

"I wasn't born. The judge gave me this sentence."

"You talk like an urban."

"What if I am?"

"Lots of urbans turn tech, go across."

"You see a brand on my cheek?"

"You might have passed the test and got in. You might be a *double-crosser*."

"There's no such thing. Anybody bright enough to pass stays in."

"Maybe you'd like to be bright enough."

"Maybe."

The man had been fiddling with the rope. His hand lashed out viciously, and the heavy knot clubbed Sam across the temple. The stool toppled and Wuncie crashed to the floor.

"Teach him."

Heavy boots stamped across the floor. Then they stamped on Wuncie. He howled until a hard heel jammed against his windpipe. Then his skull exploded. A mo-

ment later, he was being slapped awake; he roared and struck out blindly. He grabbed a handful of shirtfront.

"Down, Rover! It's me!" barked Nosey's voice.

He peered around at a foggy room. It was empty.

"Where —?"

"You been asleep awhile."

"How long?"

"Long enough to draw flies. Go home."

Wuncie picked himself up weakly and staggered to lean on the bar. "Need a drink," he hissed, shaking his groggy head and exploring his bruises.

"Show me your dough?"

"Hell, you know — you saw . . ." He paused and felt in his pockets. He looked glum.

"I told you — you been asleep."

Wuncie called him an obscenity.

"I didn't roll you."

He stood waking up slowly.

"Go home," said Nosey. "I want to close. And don't come back for a while. You picked that fight."

"*What* fight?" Wuncie groaned, nursing his skull. "You call it a fight?"

"You had it coming. I don't want my customers picking trouble with Border Guards. Just beat it."

"Where'd those thugs go?"

"Wherever the crosser went. Now, get out of here."

As Wuncie's vision cleared, his

rage returned. He reached across the bar, grabbed a fistful of Nosey, and battered it with his other hand. Nosey flailed back, cursing and screaming for his wife. Wuncie hauled him across the bar and dumped him on the floor.

"I'm mad, Nosey. You gonna tell me where they went, or do I take my mad out on you?"

"West End," muttered the cowed bartender. "Said they'd look for Bandage-face out there."

"Thanks, friend." Wuncie let him up.

"If I was your friend I wouldn't have told you," Nosey snapped.

"Thanks anyway."

Nosey laughed harshly. "Now they won't have to tie the rope to the tree. You're both about the same size."

"Who?"

"You and the crosser. Tie one on each end and throw it over a limb. You'll balance."

"Pray for me," Wuncie snarled, and went out into the street.

It was late, and the lamplighter had extinguished all but one tallow flame in each block. The street was empty; even the girl had gone home or found a customer. Black shadows fluttered, and stars were dimly visible through a mist-shroud. He stood listening to the wind for a moment, then walked west.

The city was nearly depopulated. Cities, even small ones,

were phenomena of technology or commerce, and with industry gone people sought a plot of land and a few chickens. This had been a railroad town, but the rails were rusty on top, and men were ripping them up to get iron for plows.

A poster was nailed to a wall opposite a streetlamp, and he paused briefly to gaze at it: a sketch of Colonel MacMahon's grandly stern visage, with the inscription: "Men of Ruralland! Rally to me! The arrogant foes of mankind who call themselves 'the Restoration Committee' have excluded our people from the heritage that is rightfully ours. Their heresy is as old as Man, and the false classes they create on the pretense of testing aptitudes are devices of growing tyranny. Join my legions, and I shall sweep them from their usurper's throne, that all men may once again enjoy the fruits of decent civilization."

Sam Wuncie spat thoughtfully on the poster and walked on. The three men who pursued the crosser were members in a division of MacMahon's legions — the Border Guard — who made certain that people in the rural areas stayed away from the testing booths that were set up at the barbed-wire enclosures around the industrial and urban sectors of the country.

He wandered among the dark alleyways, pausing occasionally to listen. There was only the wind

in the live oaks, and the rattle of loose tin on a garage roof. He moved on.

Why bother? he wondered briefly. He didn't particularly care what they did to the crosser. He would live longer if he just forgot about it.

But he had a red mad burning deep in his belly. The boys had kicked him around. In a world like this it was boot for boot, and double damages. When nobody could enforce the peace, each man had to enforce his own — but there weren't any sixguns to make all men equal. There were wits and lead pipes and the fast-burning fuse of hate. If you broke the legs of the man who kicked you, you accomplished social justice. If you failed to do so, you neglected your duty to the next man he might decide to kick. A hard code, but it worked — and workability was the yardstick of rightness.

He prowled through garages as he moved along, searching for a suitable weapon. Most of them had been cleaned out, but he found an archery target in the third place he searched. The house was deserted. He broke in through the back door and came out a few minutes later with a fifty-pound bow, a dozen target arrows, and a small meat cleaver.

A muttering cry came to his ears from the north. It was brief and feeble. He paused to peer

along the streets and saw the faint aura of a bonfire several blocks away. He turned toward it and broke into a quiet trot. Men were talking and laughing in low tones. Another feeble scream, then a brief snatch of song:

*"He floats through the air with
the greatest of ease,
O the daring young man on
the flying trapeze.
His movements are graceful,
all the girls he does please,
And my love he has stolen
away."*

Another low scream.

Sam stole to the end of the block and peered around the corner of the house. A huge oak tree overhung the street. They had built a bonfire on the pavement. The crosser's feet were caught in the noose, and he hung head down from a high limb. The men were singing and laughing while one of them swung him back and forth across the flames. He was naked to the waist, and his scrawny back was criss-crossed by red stripes.

One of the men was silhouetted. Eyes glittering in the firelight, Wuncie quietly fitted an arrow to the bow. He was no expert archer, but the man was only ten yards away and standing still.

Their singing drowned the twang of the bow. The man screamed and clawed at the feathered shaft pro-

truding from his back. He staggered and fell across the flames. Not realizing what had happened, the others darted to drag him out. The bow sang again. A man howled and fell across the curb. He rolled in the weeds and jerked a bloody arrow out of his rump. He stood up, but his hip gave way and he fell again.

The third man scurried for the shadows. Sam unleashed two shafts after him, but he was gone.

Wuncie advanced cautiously. The crosser was whimpering and trying to keep himself swinging. His hair caught fire.

The man who had fallen in the weeds was the ropeman, and he tried to crawl away. Sam got in front of him.

"Look up at me, Bub."

The man looked up.

Sam kicked his teeth out. He rested quietly.

"Help . . . help . . ." It was the man with the arrow in his back.

Sam went to the bonfire and caught the swinger's arms. The fellow was only half conscious.

"Grab me around the neck. I'll get you down."

The crosser seized him frantically, and Wuncie loosened the noose. He fell to his hands and knees.

"Your back's in bad shape."

The crosser looked unspoken gratitude at Sam, then glanced at the wounded man trying to drag

himself out of the street. The crosser growled in his throat and crawled after him. Sam let them settle it between themselves. It was about an even match until the crosser jerked the arrow out and used it again. The Border Guard lay in the gutter, and the crosser sat panting on the curb.

"Thanks, fellow," he grunted.

"I didn't do you any favor, crossy. You're better off dead."

"Then why — ?"

"Thank your little playmates. They made an error. They tried to change my attitude."

The crosser swayed dizzily and moaned. His hair was burned away, and his face was blackened.

"Maybe you'll be better off now."

"Why?"

"If you're burned bad enough, you can't tell the brand from the scars."

"Ugh — "

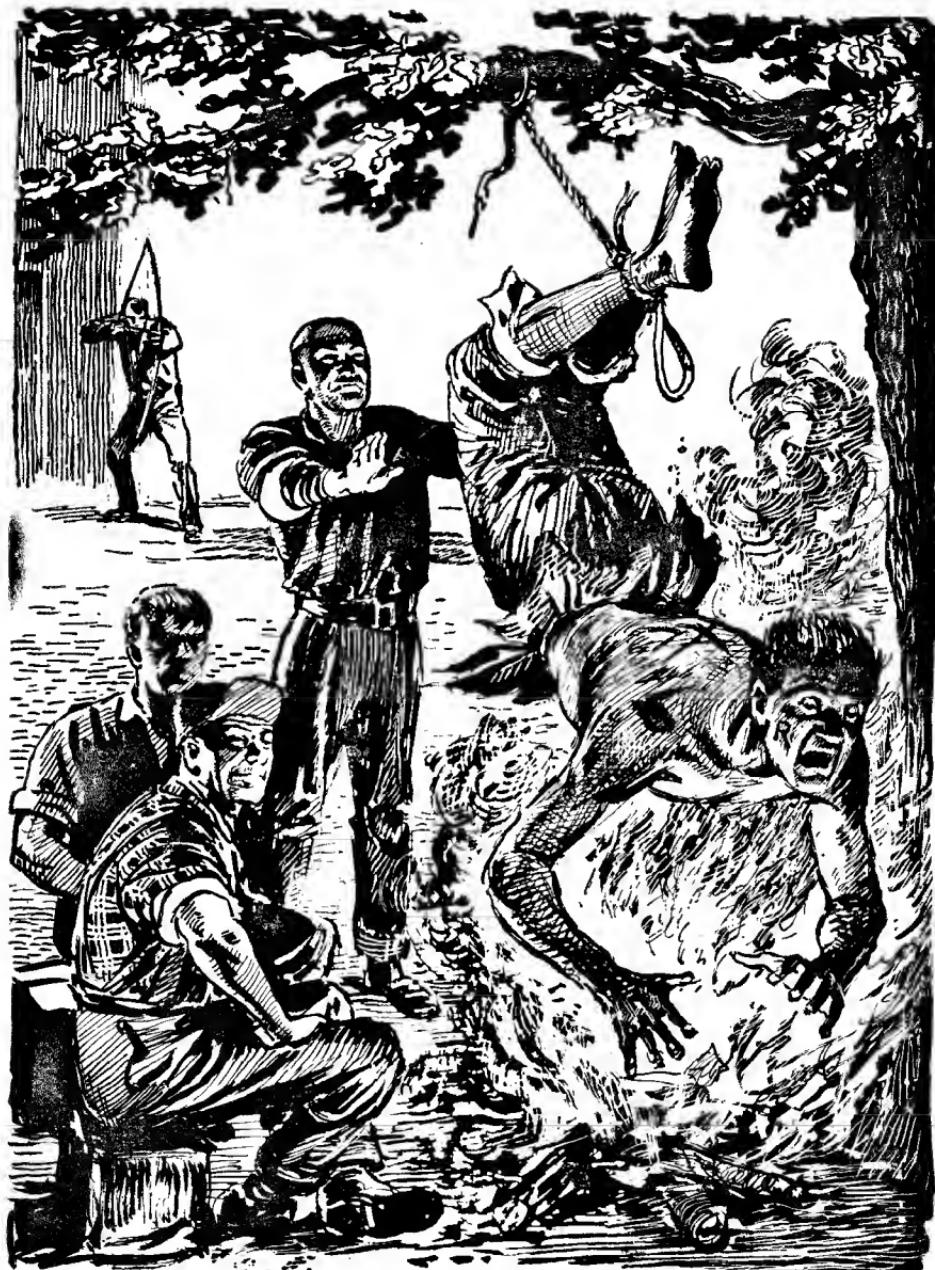
Sam pitched the cleaver in the weeds beside him. "Go hack yourself off some oak bark. Boil it, let it cool, soak your head in it. Tannic acid."

"Thanks."

Sam started away, then paused. "Tell me something, Bud."

"Huh?"

"What made you try to cross? You're old enough to remember the war. You know what happened to one industrial age. You want to make another?"



The crosser shook his head mournfully. "Three of us wanted to get inside. Sabotage. Let the rurals in."

"But you flunked the tests?"

"We figured we could pass. We were engineers before the war. Passed the I.Q.s and aptitudes okay. They gave us a Rorschach though. And they put us under pentothal hypnosis. Questioning. They figured what we wanted."

"That was dumb of you. You should have known."

"It might have worked. Zella had it planned."

"Who's Zella?"

"Psychologist. A tech. They gave her a bum deal in Jacksonville, and she double-crossed. She worked us over first — before we tried it. Thought post-hypnotic suggestion might get us through. It didn't work. Now she knows how to do it. But they've got us spotted."

Sam hesitated frowning "Where is this Zella?"

The crosser shook his head.

"The fire's still burning," Sam muttered darkly. "And the rope's still up."

The crosser shuddered. "I can't squeal on her —"

"Look, Bud. I did you a favor. Now do me one."

"Why do you want to know?"

"Maybe I'm interested in trying it myself."

"Maybe you'd sic the B.G.s on her."

"Your brain's scorched. There's your answer in the gutter. Try another maybe."

The man paused. "South Jacksonville," he grunted. "About a mile south of the barrier. Find an old telephone directory and look up Zella Richmond."

"Her own place, huh? Good hideout. I'll buy that. Take care of your head."

He left the crosser sitting on the curb and went to find an empty bed. Up to now, life was picking beans and hoeing corn for a buck a day and a meal. An ambitious man could do better than that, he thought, and if he could get inside one of the industrial areas for awhile, he could collect enough stuff to buy a dozen MacMahons and half of Ruralland.

It was a five-day northward hike to Jacksonville along the deserted, vine-covered highway. The roads and towns were unmarked by war, for the northern city was the only Florida town that had been neutralized by the enemy fleets, and the only one that had been seized by the Restoration Committee.

Small farms along the way offered the hospitality of their tables by daylight, but no sane man would accommodate a stranger after dark. He slept on beaches and in deserted buildings of small

towns. He had become a skilled nomad, for Sam Wuncie could never confine himself to a few acres of land and a plow.

He had been fifteen when the Hemispheric Conflict began, and he had graduated from high school into the arms of selective service. He was sent to the air force, rushed through flight training, routed to jet-pilot school, then grounded for high susceptibility to aeroembolism. They made him a yes-man to a colonel, but he said "no." So they made him a mess officer. But another colonel was chiseling on the mess fund, and Lieutenant Wuncie tried to dull the chisel. He spent the rest of the war in an Arctic weather station, sending up balloons and watching the guided missiles thunder both ways across the polar regions. When the guided missiles stopped coming, there was no way to get home except to walk, for the technology that supported transportation lay quiet in radioactive loneliness. The long trek south from Alaska had taken him a year and a half, and it satisfied him that he was fit to survive. That was six years ago.

He might have tried to enter one of the Committee-controlled regions, but he resented the system that excluded the "technologically unfit"—judged according to the committee's standards. Before the committee allowed a yokel to take the tests,

it made him agree to submit to the small "R" brand on his right cheek in the event that he failed — to make him recognizable as a "basically rural" personality if he tried to crash the gate again. Sam saw the branding as brutal irresponsibility, for the committee was surely aware of what the excluded population was likely to do to a man who had plainly tried to surpass them.

The wind stiffened during the days of his journey, and low flying scud darted inland beneath dark overcast. The gulls followed the scud, and he noticed legions of ants migrating to higher ground. It was September, and the air smelled of hurricane. Somewhere in the Atlantic was a storm, but there was no weather bureau to predict its course.

On the morning of the fifth day he heard aircraft engines droning from somewhere above the clouds — the first such sound he had heard since the end of the war. He stood frozen on the empty highway, listening until the plane was out of earshot. The Committee was making progress. But he was angry because of the nostalgic knot the sound tied in his stomach.

When he came within grape-vine distance of Jacksonville, he noticed that the farmers were boarding up their house windows. Evidently the city had a weather

station, and the plane had been a hurricane reconnaissance ship. The farmers had probably seen the techs preparing for a storm, and had passed the word along the line. The daylight was gloomy gray as he entered the south suburbs of the city.

He chose side streets and alleyways, for he was nearing the barbed-wire barriers set up by the Committee, and getting closer to the half-mile quarantine zone declared by MacMahon and patrolled by his vicious Border Guard.

He found an ancient telephone directory after searching through several old commercial buildings, and he looked for Zella Richmond. The name was listed, and the address was only a dozen blocks away. He was surprised that the crosser had been telling the truth.

The wind was reaching gale force. He leaned against it as he moved along, watching the house numbers in passing.

"Hey, you!"

Sam stopped. A few steps away a man in a leather jacket stood in the entrance of an old drug-store. He carried what appeared to be a home-made crossbow, loaded with a sharp-tipped length of welding rod. Sam frowned bewilderment and started away.

"I meant *you*, Curly."

"Yeah?" He stopped again.

The man came forward, holding his weapon casually aimed at

Sam. "Where you think you're going?"

"Down the street about two blocks."

"This street."

"Yeah. G'bye."

"Hold it!"

Sam held it. The man's eyes were narrowed suspiciously.

"What address?" he grunted.

"I should give you dames' addresses?"

The interrogator cranked the crossbow a notch tighter. "Yeah. You should. Believe me. What house number you looking for?"

"Thirty-six twenty-six."

The crossbow took better aim. The man jerked his head. "That's the wrong answer. Back where you came from, boy."

"Look! I'm goddam tired of being shoved around. I'm going to —"

"Beat it!" the guard bawled. "G'wan back, or you'll get tired of being dead."

"You mind telling me why?"

"Yeah. There ain't no such address. Who you looking for?"

"Zella Richmond."

"Turn around," the man snapped coldly.

"I thought you said to —"

"I changed my mind. Walk straight ahead. I'm taking you in."

"In where?" Sam began walking in the direction he had wanted to go, and the guard came behind him.

"In trouble, Curly, in big trouble."

"You Border Guard?"

"Shut up."

They walked for two blocks.

"Turn in here," his captor ordered.

Sam glanced at the address on the big, two-story, white-frame house set among live oaks. It was 3626.

Sam paused on the porch to glance back at the man who herded him. The man wore a twisted grin.

"Take a good look around before you go in," he grunted.

"Why?"

"You might not come out again."

A man's footsteps were thudding down the hall toward the door. "Sergeant Quinn, is that you?" growled a deep voice.

"Yes sir. I caught somebody looking for this address. He wanted to see Zella Richmond."

A big man in uniform appeared in the doorway. Sam stared at his stern, proud face — and recognized it.

"Inside," grunted Colonel MacMahon.

"I guess I had the wrong place," Sam muttered, backing away.

Something hit him a sharp blow in the small of the back. He arched and groaned.

"Inside," the colonel repeated,

then called over his shoulder: "Lieutenant Greeves, Corporal Sweltin — front hall!"

Two other men appeared, glanced at the captive, looked questioningly at the colonel.

"Put him in the basement."

Sam's arms were wrenched behind his back. Handcuffs snapped around his wrists. They led him toward a stairway.

"What is this?" he snarled. "I didn't do anything to you!"

The corporal shoved him hard. "Nah, we're doing it to you. Downstairs!"

The basement was gloomy and damp. One of the men looped a chain around a drainpipe, slipped it through the circle of Wuncie's fettered arms, and snapped a padlock on it.

"Fix him up with what he'll need," ordered the lieutenant. He climbed the stairs and disappeared.

The corporal rummaged through the basement, brought a gallon jug of water, a dirty blanket, a loaf of moldy bread, and a bucketful of withered root-vegetables from a bin.

"Make yerself t'home, Chum. Just be quiet and don't bother anybody. If yuh need to go, don't use the floor. Dump the stuff out of the bucket and use it."

"I want to see the colonel."

"You saw him."

The corporal trudged up the stairs and slammed the door,

leaving him alone. The wind was howling about the house. Occasionally, quiet footsteps padded overhead. A rat scurried across the floor and scrambled into the potato bin. Sam tested the drainpipe. It was secure. He sat down on the blanket to think.

The crosser had either lied to him, or Zella Richmond was teamed up with Colonel MacMahon, or perhaps something had occurred since the crosser had been here. Obviously, if Zella and MacMahon had been working together in trying to get the crosser into the city, MacMahon's boys wouldn't have been after the crosser when he failed.

His irritation grew, but it was mostly directed against himself. He had hoped to worm his way into the city, steal as much as he could, and sell it outside to the yokels. But he had stupidly walked into the open jaws of somebody's trap. What did they want with him? Apparently the man with the crossbow had been willing to let him go until he mentioned the name Zella Richmond. Was there a Zella Richmond? Or had MacMahon merely adopted the former tenant's monicker as a code name?

There was nothing to do but wait and see. After a time, he began to drowse. But quick footsteps on the stairway brought his head up with a jerk.

It was a girl — a frowning girl

with close-cropped black hair, olive skin, and hard green eyes that studied him like a specimen. She had nice calves, but they moved in a businesslike way, and she carried a sheaf of papers.

"Hello!" he said.

She dragged up an empty keg and sat on it — just beyond the radius of his chain. She plucked a pencil out of her hair and aimed it at a note-pad.

"Name?"

"Thaddeus Twench."

The pencil hung motionless. She looked up slowly. "You want to get out of here alive?"

"Sam Wuncie — W-U-N-C-I-E."

This time the pencil moved. "What are you good for?"

"Huh?"

"What are you good for? What do you do best?"

"Get in trouble."

"You're proving it. Which do you want to be, cute or alive?"

"Fly an airplane."

Red rage colored her face. She turned to call for a thug.

"I told you, damn it!" he belledowed. "I was a pilot!"

She paused, peering at him. Her eyebrows lifted slowly. She got up and climbed the stairs. "He was a pilot, Mac!" she called into the house.

"Then get the dope on him," came the faint answer.

She came back down. "You're lucky, Wuncie. The colonel needs a pilot."

He laughed. There wasn't a usable aircraft outside the tech sectors. "You Zella Richmond?" he asked.

She nodded. "Who sent you here?"

"A guy."

"It's not important." She shuffled through her papers and brought out a handful. "I'm going to show you a series of cards. They'll have irregular blots of ink on them. Look at the card closely and try to find objects in them. Take your time, tell me what objects you see. Some people see one thing, some people see another. Use your imagination. See as many things as you can in each picture."

"Rorschach?" he grunted, frowning. "Why in the name of —?"

"First plate."

He looked at it, saw nothing. "I see a team of mules, a fried banana, six little girls, and my grandmother's glass eyeball."

She laid it aside calmly and turned toward the stairs. "Corporal Sweltin! Come and get me some cooperation!" she yelled.

Corporal Sweltin came and kicked Sam in the belly twice. Thereafter, Sam cooperated. They freed his right hand from the cuffs at her request.

The girl finished the Rorschach and turned to association tests. Then came affective choice, apti-

tude, and I.Q. When she had finished, she left him alone and went upstairs to evaluate results.

The rat sat on the edge of the vegetable bin and stared at him as if wondering about his protein content. He kicked an apple core at it and the rat darted away.

The wind drove rain against the basement window and the water leaked down the wall to collect in a widening puddle. He stuffed the blanket in the bucket and sat on it. He counted his pulse to measure time. He had counted to three thousand when the door opened and two men creaked down the stairs. One was Colonel MacMahon. The other was a short, sleazy, chubby fellow with narrow eyes and unkempt hair. He wore an unpressed blue suit and a dirty white shirt.

The colonel smiled at his prisoner magnanimously.

"I understand you are a pilot, Wuncie."

"So?"

"Can you fly a very ancient four-engine transport?"

"I can fly anything I want to fly. But I don't want to fly anything. Get your goddam flunkies to unlock this chain."

"Tell me, Wuncie — how do you feel about my cause?"

"I don't feel about it. I just feel about my own."

"Which is?"

"Sam Wuncie."

"Your answers don't coincide

with Miss Richmond's estimate of you."

"That's easy," the girl called from the head of the stairs. "He just likes to play tough boy. It's only a defense."

The colonel frowned. "Wuncie, I need you."

"Then buy me."

"What's your price?"

"That depends on the deal. What do you want of me?"

The colonel hesitated, then sat down on the keg and put on a confidential manner. "We're going to get a pilot inside the tech zone. He's going to steal a cargo plane and fly it out."

"You're nuts."

The colonel glowered. "It's all planned, Wuncie. And you're our man. Furthermore, now's the time to do it, while this storm has them off guard. The ships will be in the hangars. You'll slip inside, and stay aboard a ship until after the storm. When the ground crew comes to taxi the plane back to the flight line, you'll let them get the engines started, then force them out and take off. You'll fly the ship to the old Orlando Air Base."

"What do you want with it?"

"I have forty men waiting at Orlando. We've dug up forty parachutes and several cases of dynamite. You'll drop them over Jacksonville at night. That's all. Their tasks are already assigned."

"Let's see," Sam grunted. "One man dynamites the main transformers at the power station. Half a dozen blow a breach in the barrier to let a pack of your boys in. Another batch grabs control of an arsenal. What else?"

The colonel paused, then smiled. "I have no objection to telling you the plan. As soon as we secure weapons, a detail will go to intercept and kill the committee members as they leave their homes. There are a number of police boats in the harbor. Some of my men will seize them and put out to sea. The boats have machine-guns and ammunition aboard. They will be put in at Daytona."

Sam thought about it a moment. "To be used for other raids on other coastal cities? What about fuel?"

"There are several tankers in the harbor. We're going to try to get one of them out."

"What about the coastal guns?"

"We'll try to silence them beforehand, but we'll have to chance it. Our only real weapon is surprise."

"The theft of the aircraft will disarm you, then. They'll be on guard."

"I don't think so. I think the techs will expect a bombing raid rather than an air-commando attack. They underestimate us."

"Tell me something, MacMahon."

"Ask me," the colonel grunted.

"Why don't you let well enough alone?"

"What do you mean?" The officer's frown was demanding.

"Why don't you let the committee have what they've got, and forget about it? There aren't any governments any more, except for local ones — and the committee. Everything's peaceful except on a local level. The committee's managing to keep industry alive. Anybody who wants to join them can — if he's qualified. Their system'll break down in a few years — from the inside. If you tear it down, you'll probably tear the technology down as well."

The colonel straightened and a fierce anger came into his eyes. "They have excluded the common man! They have said, 'We shall decide who is fit and who unfit.' They have made themselves God. They have taken what rightfully belongs to all men."

"Did all men build it?"

"They have created an artificial aristocracy; an amoral, godless, cynical pack of engineers. They call us yokels. And they exclude us from their house like dogs. Already they are instituting a program of selective breeding among themselves. Do you know what they did to Miss Richmond?"

Sam glanced up irritably at the girl standing at the head of the stairs. She looked away.

"Unlocked her chastity belt?" he asked.

She stepped through the door and slammed it.

"They insisted she marry at once. They gave her a choice of six men, three of whom were negroes!"

Sam chuckled sourly. Evidently the colonel had some ideas of his own about what constituted a second-class citizen.

"It's not funny, Wuncie!"

"My mistake."

"Will you assist us?"

"What do I get out of it?"

"If you do an efficient job, you may have whatever administrative position in my forces you desire. Within a few months we should have control of the Jacksonville sector. It's isolated, completely surrounded by rural areas, and supplied only by shipping from the northern sectors and by air. You may have command of the air installations if you wish. You are the only pilot I've been able to find. All others have crossed."

Sam hesitated. The colonel's plan seemed to him a grandiose delusion. Nevertheless, they might be able to get him into the city. Once in the city, he would be out of their control. Then he could steal a truck, break into a commissary, load up with farm tools, weapons, or whatever was saleable, and crash out on a north highway. If the techs caught a

yokel in the city, they did nothing more than throw him out after a good beating. It was worth a try.

"I'll go along," he grunted.

The colonel smiled tightly. "I can't trust you, of course. We'll have to find a way to insure your cooperation." He glanced at the chubby man who had been standing to one side, saying nothing, and watching Sam Wuncie with cold narrow eyes.

"Well, Doctor Harlich, have you thought of a way to make him cooperate?"

The doctor nodded slowly. "I believe so. Do you recall the dog we captured last week?"

"The one that bit Manter? Of course, but . . ." The colonel paused. A puzzled expression changed slowly into a dry smile. "I *see!*" he purred. "Very clever, Doctor."

"Shall I attend to it, sir?"

"At once, please."

Colonel MacMahon stood up, gave Wuncie an amused nod, and left the basement. Doctor Harlich followed close on his heels. From the top of the stairway he looked down at the captive and laughed a soundless, pink-gummed laugh. Wuncie shivered. There was something about the chubby man that suggested sadism. What was this talk about a dog?

When the door closed, the rat scurried from under the stairs and

returned to the vegetable bin. After a time, Wuncie heard sounds of argument from upstairs. The girl and the colonel debated angrily, but Sam couldn't make sense of it for the muffling sound of the rain and the wind.

Darkness was beginning to fall. He ate a little of the bread and raw vegetables, and wrapped himself in the blanket against the damp chill of the cellar.

A little later the door opened, and Doctor Harlich came down followed by four guards, one of whom carried an oil lantern. He hung the lantern on a nail, and the doctor approached Wuncie with a little smile. Something glittered in his hand — a hypodermic. His voice was soft with bedside solicitation.

"Roll up your sleeve, please, Wuncie."

"I don't need a shot right now, fat boy. Thanks just the same."

"I ask you to cooperate, Wuncie. Colonel MacMahon's orders."

"Get away from me with that thing or I'll shove it up your obscenity." He arose with a growl and backed against the wall.

"Ask Wuncie to 'cooperate, men."

The four guards approached him cautiously. Sam kicked at one. Another man caught the foot and spilled him with it. They sat on him.

"Cooperate, Wuncie," another

said sourly as he bared the captive's arm.

"Glad to oblige," he mumbled. Harlich bent down chuckling. "It won't hurt much, Wuncie," he purred. "Just a mosquito bite. Hold still now."

He squirmed. The needle bit his shoulder muscle. The plunger went home.

"What's in it?" he muttered.

"Just the saliva of a rabid dog," Harlich said as he jerked out the needle.

He roared and fought, but it was too late. They released him and darted out of reach. Harlich's face was gleeful as he grinned at the victim.

"Don't curse so, Wuncie," he said. "I have the serum."

They went away and left him cursing in darkness. But hardly had they gone when the girl came back with the lantern. He turned the curses at her.

"I brought you some light," she said calmly. "It'll keep the rats away."

"I don't see *you* running from it."

She hung the lantern on a nail and stood staring at him for a moment with the ice-green eyes. "I'm sorry for you, Yokel."

"Said the schizo when he stabbed his mother. Break it off, Sister, and ram it!"

She nodded. "I tried to talk them out of it, believe me. It de-

stroys your usefulness later on. You'll work for them only until they finish giving you the Pastcur treatment."

"What makes you think I'll stick around that long?"

"You'll have to — if you want the treatment. Unless you think you can find another doctor with serum. I'm sure you can't."

"In Jacksonville —"

She shook her head. "No, they wouldn't have it, because they don't have the problem. No animals in the city except livestock. They're short of food, so they don't allow pets."

Sam sat glaring at her in helpless defeat.

"Tell me something," he grunted. "Does a yokel get worse treatment than this at the hands of the committee?"

She flushed slowly. "I'm sorry, Wuncie, I don't always agree with MacMahon's methods. But if he'll break down the barrier, I'm with him."

"You joined him recently, huh?"

She nodded. "He convinced me that we should coordinate our efforts."

"Why do *you* want the barrier down?"

She reddened slowly, and among other things he sensed a woman jilted.

"I don't believe in the committee's authoritarian methods," she said.

"You prefer the colonel's brand, huh?"

"I don't have time to argue with you, Wuncie," she said. "We're leaving in about an hour."

"We?"

"You and I."

"Why you?"

"I know where to go and how to get there. You'd fall into a nest of guards alone."

When she was gone, he sat dejectedly trying to figure a way out. But he had seen a child die of rabies once; the convulsive spasms had torn muscle and fractured bone before death came. He shuddered. There was nothing to do but play along with the colonel and hope the sadistic Harlich really had the serum and would start the treatments in time. He promised himself a satisfying revenge, whether they gave him treatments or not. If they didn't, he resolved to bite all three of them.

A lieutenant came downstairs with a small black bag and gave the prisoner a friendly smile. "The colonel tells me you're going to cooperate with us, Wuncie," he said.

Sam nodded, deciding that the junior officer didn't know about the rabies shot. He stepped forward and produced a key.

"Let me have your wrist. I'll unlock that chain."

When he was free, Sam grunted

his thanks and started for the stairs.

"Just a minute. I brought my kit down here."

Wuncie glanced at the black bag and waited. "What kit?"

"Sit down. I've got to change your right thumbprint."

"Change my what? Okay, this I'll see."

The lieutenant handed him a bit of fine sandpaper. "Work your thumb over with it good. Get it fairly smooth. Don't sand till it bleeds, though. Stop when it hurts."

Sam dragged his thumb across the paper until the whorls grew fainter and the thumb felt tender. The officer then painted it with a colorless solution, rolled it across a piece of ground glass, then waited for it to dry.

"What's that stuff?"

"It's a plastic filler. Seals up the remaining grooves. If they took your print now, it'd be a blank."

He dipped into the bag again and brought out another bottle and a flat piece of metal wrapped in chamois. He held it up for Sam's inspection, and there was a dark spot on it.

"Engraving of a different print," he said. "Ex-counterfeiter made it for us."

"Fictitious? Or did it belong to somebody?"

"It belonged to a tech. About a month ago two techs sneaked out

of Jacksonville. They went up the St. John's River in a canoe. Wanted to make a deal with some farmers to ship food into the city. They're living out of hydroponic tanks, you know — plus some seafood. Anyway, these two techs got past MacMahon's guards okay, but the farmers caught them and turned them in. We got their identity plates and had a pair of engravings made from their prints."

He painted the engraving carefully with the second solution. It crept out across the metal like oil, filling the impression with pinkish fluid. He flicked off the excess with a flat rubber blade, then took Wuncie's thumb and gingerly rolled it across the plate.

"Don't blow it, just let it dry. Careful!"

Sam stared at the new set of lines on his thumb. "Where'd you get this stuff?"

"I was with Intelligence during the war. They used it quite a bit. Far as I know, this is the only bottle left. You'll have to be careful of that thumb. The plastic is tough, but you can scratch it off if you rub something rough."

"Now that I got it, what do I do with it?"

The lieutenant handed him a transparent disk with a dark thumbprint engraved in the plastic. A name was printed on it: Robert J. Klonish. There were

two bubbles in the plastic, and they seemed to be filled with a dark powder.

"You're Klonish now."

"Why didn't you just change the thumbprint on this thing?"

"Wouldn't work. They've got a system. A duplicate of this thing is filed in a central vault under the date of issue. See those two pockets of powder? They're slightly radioactive, with a known half-life. The techs stick this disk in a counter to get the date of issue. The central analyzer picks the duplicate out of the files for that name and date. It televises the print to the checking station together with the date. The dates have to check. The prints have to check. And your thumb has to check with them both."

Sam stared at him curiously. "You a renegade tech?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "We got the dope from the captives."

"That's not what I meant. You just talk like a tech."

The officer shrugged. "You could be one too, from the way Zella Richmond talks. Why didn't *you* cross?"

"I don't like rigid systems."

"Theirs isn't so rigid."

"Why didn't *you* cross?"

The lieutenant hesitated. He packed the things in the bag. "My son," he said. "I've got a little boy. He's feeble-minded. Naturally, there's no use trying to get

him in. A man can't leave his family."

He turned away stiffly and marched up the stairs, leaving Sam to follow. Colonel MacMahon and Zella Richmond were waiting in the flickering lamplight when he entered the front room. The colonel pitched him a bundle of clothes.

"Put these on," he grunted. "Techs don't wear overalls."

Sam stepped into the next room to change.

"You understand our terms, don't you, Wuncie?" MacMahon called.

"I steal you an airplane," he said dully, "you give me the Pasteur treatment."

"Right."

"Just one thing. You try welshing, I can be a pretty mean little boy."

"Your threat doesn't bother me, Wuncie. But don't worry, I have no reason to let you die if you do your job properly."

"That's no good. What reason would you have to let me live?"

"Why — you'd continue to be useful to me."

Sam said nothing further. The colonel was lying. Zella Richmond had already told MacMahon her opinion of his future usefulness. He finished dressing and returned to the front room.

"What's next?" he grunted.

"Just follow Miss Richmond's

very valuable instructions."

"Okay, Miss Turncoat — where do we go from here?"

The girl flushed angrily. "My name's Faye Alfer from now on. Don't forget it. What's yours? Remember?"

"Bob Klonish."

"Check. Let's go."

"Good luck," said MacMahon. He made the mistake of extending his hand. Sam glanced at it coldly and walked away from it.

The rain had stopped except for an occasional drop whipped along by the gale. The streets were in blackness, but they could see the bright lights of northern Jacksonville glowing on the underside of the clouds and silhouetting the buildings along the street ahead of them.

"The checking station is in the center of the bridge across the St. John's River," she called. "Now, get this straight. We picked tonight because of the storm — made it easier for two techs to sneak through the rural guard lines. But they won't ask many questions if your identification is okay."

Sam was carefully guarding the altered thumb. "Suppose the guys at the station happen to know Robert Klonish?"

"There are over a million people in that tech sector. There are five men at the station. If each man has two thousand acquaintances, the odds are a hundred to

one against their knowing Klonish, without even allowing for overlapping."

"Yah, but let's don't do it a hundred times."

"You'll do it a dozen times before we get outside again, so take care of that thumb. Don't wear it out."

A few minutes later they stood at the river looking along the span of roadway that stood on concrete stilts above it.

"Electric lights," he breathed. "Lord — I'd forgotten. . . ."

The girl too was staring at the myriad glittering of the choppy water, at the flood of light along the opposite shore. The gale was whipping toward the city, but faintly they could hear the growl of traffic.

She hardened suddenly. "Let's go," she snapped. "Run as if you had just gotten past the guard."

They broke into a trot.

"Not so fast!" barked a voice from the shadows.

They stopped. A man with a crossbow advanced slowly out of darkness.

"You *fool!*" the girl raged at him. "This is Klonish and Alfer. Get back before the techs see you. I'll get you court-martialed. I'll —"

The guard retreated hastily.

"Now run!"

They ran toward the guard shack in the center of the span. After a hundred yards, a search-

light picked them up from the shack, then fell to make a pathway of glare on the bridge. The wind was worse over the open river, and a sudden gust sent the girl sprawling.

"How's your thumb?" he grunted as he helped her up.

"Okay, but watch your own."

They ran ahead. A man in a khaki uniform came out of the shack, carrying a shotgun at port-arms. "What do you want, Yokels? Stop right there."

They came to a halt. The spotlight again played over them. Zella laughed. "We look that crummy?" she called. "It's Klonish and Alfer, checking in after recon. Look at your check-sheet."

The man called something to an aide in the shack. A few moments later another man emerged.

"You're listed," he called. "But you're a week late, and Commissioner Jenkins wants you immediately."

"Uh-oh," grunted Sam.

"Is that on the check-sheet, or did you just call him?" she asked.

"It's on the day-list. Okay, come on forward. Hands locked behind your heads. Walk straight and stop right here." He drew an imaginary line across the pavement with his boot, then stepped back.

Hands aloft, they moved forward until they stood in the glare of the floodlights around the shack. The man with the shotgun stood

warily aside while the other frisked them from behind.

"Okay, drop your hands. Let's step in the shack."

Three guards were lounging in the building, and Sam held his breath lest one of them know Klonish or Alfer. But the men glanced up incuriously and returned to their card game.

"Let's have the duckets, please," said their interrogator. "And leave your thumbprints on the scanner."

After he had taken the plastic disks, Zella stepped to a metal table, rolled her phony thumb across an ink pad, and transferred the impression to a transparent slide that slid out of a vertically mounted scope that spilled bright slivers of light on the wall.

"Hurry up, Klonish," grunted the interrogator. "You take the other one."

Sam stepped to the table and imitated her procedure on a duplicate instrument.

"You must be tired, brother," the man growled, reaching over his shoulder to turn the instrument on.

"Oh — sorry."

The guard inserted the identification disks in another rig, then jabbed a pair of studs. A boxful of electronic flickers came to life, and relays chattered.

"Have any trouble with the yokel vigilantes?" the interrogator asked conversationally.

"Got chased a couple of blocks. Lost them in the dark," Sam told him.

"How was the mission? You went after a food contract, I understand."

"No good. Farmers don't like us."

The man grunted disgustedly. "They want manufactured products; we want farm products. Why don't they wise up?"

"They don't like being locked out."

"If they think they're qualified to fit in tech culture, let them come in here." He jerked his head toward a doorway marked *Testing*.

"They don't like being branded if they fail."

"Well, there's a damn good reason for that."

Sam didn't ask what it was. He figured he was supposed to know.

"Anything new happen while we're gone?" Zella asked.

"Commission converted two more downtown buildings to hydroponics. If the yokels keep being stubborn, we won't even need to buy their groceries. City's getting to look like a greenhouse. Vines dangling off from everything. Next thing they'll be stringing boxes of dirt on cables between the buildings. Tomatoes dropping on your head when you cross a street."

A light flickered on the panel.

The interrogator stiffened suspiciously and backed away from

them. He unsnapped his holster and brought out a .45.

The light winked orange. It said *Delay*. Sam swallowed uneasily and glanced at Zella. Her face was frozen watching the light.

An inflectionless mechanical voice droned from a small loud-speaker. "Delay while Central accomplishes special instructions. Wait."

"Oh," grunted the interrogator and put his gun away, grinning sheepishly. "I forgot that you're to see Jenkins. Central's probably trying to find him."

He noticed that Zella was biting her lip nervously and staring at the light. Evidently an interview with Jenkins would sink them. A minute passed. The machine spoke again.

"Message from Commissioner Jenkins to Klonish and Alfer. Quote: busy as hell at the weather office now. See me tomorrow at eight sharp. Unquote. Acknowledge, please."

"Acknowledged."

The light switched to green, and it said *Identified*.

"What's wrong?" grunted the interrogator. "You look sick." He chuckled. "Jenkins isn't so tough." He moved to another panel and pressed a button, calling, "This is Slessinger. Cab to South Bridge guard shack. Klonish and Alfer, identified, going to quarters. Off."

A musical chime sounded the

deep-toned acknowledgement.

He turned back grinning. "Guess you're pretty glad to be home. I'd hate to spend more than a day in that jungle. How'd you get on with the yokels?"

Sam bristled, but made himself subside. An idea formed slowly.

"Listen," he said. "I wonder if there's any hope of getting the Pasteur treatment at the dispensary. You heard of any rabies cases recently?"

The girl nudged him viciously. Slessinger's eyebrows lifted slowly. "You were bitten?"

"Yeah. Not sure the dog was mad, of course."

The guard frowned. "Bad bite? Lemme see."

"Damned if I'll take off my —"

"Oh, sorry. Listen, lemme call Doc Terrell for you. He'll know. It'll be a minute before the cab gets here."

"Sure, thanks. I'd appreciate it."

He grinned at Zella while the man dialed. She stood quietly waiting for the results of his attempt, but the green eyes threatened mayhem.

"He wants to talk to you," said the guard, handing him the phone.

Sam grunted a nervous hello.

"Bobbie-boy!" shouted a jovial voice at the other end of the line. "When'd you get back from the sticks?"

He swallowed a lump. The man knew Klonish. "Uh — just now,"

he muttered, touching his brow.

There was a pause. "You sound funny, Bob."

"Sore throat."

"Uh-uh! Sless said you got dog-bit. When?"

"Today."

"Oh — well, that gives us plenty of time to dig up some serum — if there's any to be had."

"None in town?"

"No, but we'll contact other sectors."

"How's chances?"

There was a long silence, then: "Well, I won't kid you, Bob. Not good. But we've got at least four weeks to look. And you don't know that the dog was mad."

He couldn't say what he knew, not unless he were certain the serum was available. "Well, do your best, will you?"

"Certainly. Stop by tomorrow, Bob. I want to see the bite. And listen: don't worry. Even if the dog was rabid, lots of people are immune."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow." He hung up.

"Well?" asked the girl.

"Tell you later."

She smirked, realizing he had failed.

"There's your cab," said the guard. "Good luck with Jenkins."

The vehicle that waited outside was driverless, but the engine was purring quietly, and the door was

open to admit them. Sam looked around. There was no one outside the shack except the interrogator. Then he saw the car had no place for a driver. A radar antenna was mounted on top. Bewildered, he slipped in beside Zella.

She slipped her identity disk in a slot on the panel, and muttered for Sam to do the same. The machine clattered over them for a moment, then ejected them.

"Destination, please," croaked a speaker.

The girl whispered to him.

"Klonish's quarters," he said, his bewilderment growing.

The cab glided ahead, rocking slightly in the gale, and gathered speed.

"MacMahon won't like it when I tell him how you tried to cross us," she told him.

But Sam had eyes only for the cab which was, in the literal sense of the word, automotive. "How does this contraption work?" he grunted.

"Look at the road. See that narrow strip of steel imbedded in the concrete? There are two magnetic pick-ups under the car. One 'looks' at one side of the strip, one looks at the other side. The steering mechanism just keeps them balanced."

The cab left the bridge. Something clucked three times behind the panel. The cab slowed down, then turned right at an intersection.

"How did it know to turn?" he grunted.

"Three steel buttons back there in the street. That meant an intersection was coming up. So it slowed down, and followed the band that curved off to the right. It knows the way to your place, because when we inserted the disks it called Central for all data on you. It just counts intersection markers, then turns when the time comes."

"Suppose another car had been stalled in the lane?"

"The radar would have caught it. The car would stop. The cop would come from the corner to guide it around the obstacle."

They swished through another intersection, and Sam got a glimpse of the "cop" — an automatic traffic-regulating device, mounted on tripods with wheels, like a desk-chair. It was barrel-shaped, with long mechanical arms for directing traffic, a head cast in the visage of an Irish policeman — for authoritative effect perhaps — and a radar antenna growing from the top of the head. Its eyes glowed red or green.

He fell into silent awe at the sight of the city. The last years of the war he had spent in Alaska. He had, of course, heard of the changes that had taken place in urban life — of the application of electronic analyzers to routine tasks, of the coordination of the analyzers into complex yet inte-

grated computer networks under the name of "Central," and the marvelous advances in servo-mechanisms — but he had never witnessed the change. The cities had been radiologically unsafe after his return, and then the Restoration Committee had seized them. He had heard stories about how the complex electronic networks, powered by atomic generators, had kept the cities running smoothly even after their populations had fled — but he had not believed.

Traffic was thin on the streets, because of the gale, and only an occasional pedestrian scurried along the sidewalk, clutching his hat and bending against the wind. Nostalgia came over him, and longing as he looked around at signs of a healthy technology. Would this have come to pass if the committees had not acted, if the anarchical mobs had been allowed to mill back after the voice of the geigers had waned to a sleepy tick? Or would the leaderless mobs, in innocent but moronic vandalism, have torn the intricacies asunder for their own purposes? It was rumored that the burglary-prevention systems were still working when the committees came back. Suppose one of the mechanical cops had stood between a yokel and a grocery warehouse full of canned goods?

Perhaps the committees had been justified in their original

seizure of the cities, and in their restoration of order. But now the order was achieved and adequately policed. Why then did the committee still discriminate? Why not open the cities to anyone who wanted in? Employers operated their own systems of economic natural selection. If a man wasn't fit to hold a job, he got fired. The committee's haughty attitude seemed not only tyrannical, but pointless.

Seeing the city, he was suddenly torn by doubts. What would MacMahon do if he eventually managed to seize control? There was much bitterness among the rural population. If the city were suddenly opened to them they might enter as a pack of vengeful wolves, bent only on getting what was "rightfully theirs" and punishing those who had excluded them.

Maybe he should refuse to cooperate. But the itch in his shoulder muscle was a gun in his back. Sam Wuncie had always been primarily for Sam Wuncie — mostly because he had never found another goal that seemed worth the trouble. Now he felt restless in his pursuit of survival, sensing a vague guilt. But it was hard to decide which goal was more right: the committee's or the colonel's. Neither was a perfect answer, but there were never any perfect answers.

"Why Klonish's quarters?" he suddenly asked the girl.

"Closer to the airport."

"Why don't we just have Lizzy here run us to the airport?"

"It files our destination with Central, so that if someone wants to call us, Central knows where we are. I don't want her to know."

Sam shot a sudden glance at the panel. "Can it hear us?"

"It can, but it doesn't listen except when it asks destinations or relays calls."

He watched her for a moment as they rode through the business district. Her face was strained and white. She stared straight ahead, not looking at the urban grandeur about them. Her eyes seemed to be glistening wetly, but her mouth was hard. He grinned wryly.

"Just a country gal at heart."

"Shut up!"

"Why did you really double-cross?"

She gave him a hard stare. "Listen, Wuncie. Keep your thumb out of my pie. I did you a favor once. But I can damn sure undo it."

He recalled no favors, and told her so. She said nothing.

"I could quote the old saw," he said, "about hell hath no fury —"

Her hand arched in a vicious circle, popped him painfully across the mouth.

"That answered my question," he muttered, blotting away a streak of blood from his lip.

"It's not what you think," she snapped. "I worked as clinical psychologist in the eugenics section. The commissioner of eugenics is a woman. She hated my guts because I rated her brother class D. I was engaged to a guy in production. We applied for marriage permits. The files are secret, and you never know what class you fall into. But when you apply for a permit, you get a list of all permissible mates in the city. If your partner's name is on the list, you're okay. The lists include about a hundred thousand names for each class, and the classes are very broad. It's only very seldom somebody gets rejected."

"You did, huh?"

"No," she snapped. "We were okay. But the commissioner pulled a fast one. She marked the list 'no children' before she sent it to him. Accidentally, of course. He called her anonymously, asked for information on birth restrictions. She explained that the classes were divided according to basic genetic mental patterns, but some marriages had to remain childless on account of hereditary physical weaknesses. Herb got himself transferred to another industrial sector up north without even calling me. The commissioner's secretary told me about it later."

Sam laughed gleefully, and slapped his thigh.

"Funny as hell, isn't it!" she

snapped, her eyes glinting fire.

"The horse laugh is for the system, Babe."

She glared moodily out the window.

The Restoration Committee hadn't found any utopian formulae, he thought. A commissioner misusing authority — a vengeful, catty female getting her underhanded blow below the belt. An egotistical young man fleeing from an entanglement that suddenly seemed beneath him. A jilted, angry woman running away to plan a mean revenge. Man remained a wolf, banding into packs to attain his limited goals, snarling jealously at his fellow, stealing away to prowl alone in sulky wrath when his fellow snarled back. Man the ambivalent — half social animal, half lonely predator — with the conflicting emotions of both. There were some things that technological planning would never solve.

But he had to remain part predator in order to find any goal outside his own society. Otherwise, he would be like a herd of cattle clustered in a circle, all facing inward, seeing only one another, denying that there was a universe beyond the social microcosm, refusing to hear the howls of coyotes in the hills. No, there was no perfect social solution — nor should there be one! He wondered vaguely if the committee imagined itself

as saviour, leading man toward perfection. The Zuñi had achieved perfection — within the social microcosm — and the Kwakiutl, and the tribes of Dobu. But the microcosm had become an end in itself — whereas technological society had tried, half-heartedly perhaps, to see culture as only a tool, revisable, correctable, discardable.

The cab stopped suddenly at the curb.

"Klonish's destination," croaked the speaker.

He glanced outside. They were parked in front of an apartment building on a side street.

"Alfer will get out here too," she told the auto-pilot.

"Acknowledged. Watch your step please. Cab will depart when door is closed."

They climbed out on the sidewalk, and she slammed the door. The car glided quietly away. The street was empty of pedestrians, and the wind was stiff out of the south. The pavement was littered with torn vines and leaves that the gale had tugged from the window-box gardens that covered the sides of the buildings. Here and there, a box itself had torn loose — a heap of black dirt and a crumpled sheet metal trough on the sidewalk.

"Where now?" he asked.

"Airport. The storm seems to be dying down. Worst part of it must have passed us by."

They began walking along the

dimly lighted side streets. As they approached an all-night cafe, a man emerged and stood on the steps, idly chewing a toothpick and looking up at the stormy sky. Zella clutched Sam's arm.

"That man!" she hissed. "I know him, and he'll know me — as Zella Richmond. If he sees me, I'll have to pretend I came back. Play along."

"Who am I?"

"Pick a phony name. He might know Klonish too."

"Sam Weston."

They walked casually past the cafe. The man gathered a slow frown, then broke into a grin.

"Zella — Zella Richmond!" He bounded off the steps, reaching for her.

"Yes?" She turned, grinned, and caught his hand. "Ben Dorchett! You old dog!"

"When'd you get back? This calls for celebration!"

Sam stood dumbly aside, watching the mutual back-patting. He wondered if the safest course wouldn't be to get the guy in an alley and clobber him. But then, he would probably wake up howling for the cops before their plan was accomplished. Maybe it was best to play along and hope he wouldn't spread the word to the wrong ears that Zella was back.

"I'd rather stay obscure for awhile," Ben," she was saying. "I've got a new job, and new

friends. I'd rather you didn't tell the old gang I came back yet. Wait'll I get used to things again, huh?"

"Oh, yeah, sure!" He glanced at Sam for the first time and stuck out his hand. "Ben Dorchett."

"Sam Weston."

"Nice knowin' ya."

"Yeah."

Ben looked back at Zella and replaced his grin. He caught her arm possessively. "You gotta have a drink with us — both of you."

"I don't know, Ben — I'm tired. We —"

"Awww!" He glanced over his shoulder. A couple was just approaching the doorway. "Hey Dan, Janie!" he called. "Look what just walked up!"

The man and the girl peered through the screen at the three on the sidewalk. They broke out their best grins. They came outside. There was much auld lang syne while Sam stood glowering with pocketed hands. Moments later they were being herded inside the cafe. Zella hung back in the doorway to look around inside. He saw her sway slightly and touch one hand to her face. But the enthusiastic greeters led her firmly ahead. Sam, bringing up the rear, noticed that she kept her face abnormally averted to one side.

The cafe was half full. He heard Zella suggest a booth in the rear, but the others claimed there

wouldn't be room. They started shuffling chairs, then dragged two tables together and pressed her down in a place of honor. A party had evidently been in the process of breaking up, for two girls rejoined the group. One of them spotted Sam as a lone frowner; she assigned herself the charitable task of cheering him up.

"Isn't it just wonderful that Zella's back?" she gushed, grinning.

"Just wonderful," he agreed.

"Where do you work, Sam — I mean, if I'm not too inquisitive? I'm on the tower myself."

"I'm . . . uh . . . engineer," he grunted, then paused. "Tower, you said? Control tower? Airport?"

She laughed a musical breath of gin at him. "Of course! Where else?"

She began yammering about the niceties of her job while Sam stole cautious glances at Zella. She looked white and drawn, and she still kept her face averted from a certain sector of the room. Sam peered in the direction of aversion. Two tables were occupied, one by an elderly couple, the other by three men drinking beer. None were looking toward the party group.

"You're not listening, Sam," pouted the control-tower operator, whose name seemed to be Loretta.

"Of course I am. I think you're clever. It's a pleasure to meet a

clever woman for a change."

That should be good for a fifteen-minute lecture on female cleverness, he decided. It usually was.

Zella excused herself for a moment and hurried toward a restroom. She jostled him in passing, and he knew there was some kind of trouble. He waited, listening to Loretta with half an ear, and occasionally glancing toward the dangerous part of the room. The male half of the elderly couple seemed to be looking curiously in the direction of Zella's exit.

When she came back, she jostled Sam's chair again. He felt something lodged in his collar and plucked it out: a tightly folded bit of paper, which he crammed in his pocket without looking at it.

"... don't you think so, Sam?" Loretta challenged.

"Yeah. I sure do. You're exactly right."

She flushed slightly and looked at him admiringly. "I expected you to be bull-headed about it. I'm surprised."

"You're dead right, Honey," he repeated. "Excuse me a minute, please?"

He drifted to the men's room and unfolded the wadded note. *Sam, it said, you'll have to go on alone. The commissioner is sure to spot me before I get out of here. He's sitting at the corner table. You're on your own. Stay away from servo-*

guards, don't go through an airport gate. Sneak in the best you can. I'll have to play repentant prodigal. Luck.

He flushed the note and went back to the table. The commissioner was staring at her now, apparently trying to link a memory to a seeming impossibility. How to get out without making the others curious?

Loretta was smiling at him affectionately, patted his hand as he resumed his seat, and opened her mouth to begin again.

"Why don't we play some music?" he said quickly, looking around for a juke box.

"Silly, they don't have any here!"

He put on a desperate grin. "You like to dance?"

"Love it."

He leaned forward. "Let's go find a dance floor."

"Well . . ."

"I want to hear more about what you were saying. It's so noisy here."

She giggled. "Won't Zella be mad?"

"Oh no! We weren't really together."

She giggled again. "It'll look awful, just walking out."

"I'll show you how," he promised. "Come on." He took her arm and, blushing, she arose. "Excuse us, everybody," he said bluntly. "We'll be back in a few minutes."

There was a snicker, and a low catcall, and a testing "Hurry back!"

"I feel awful," she said as they went out into the wind. But she caught his hand, leaned against him, and looked up.

"Let's walk out past the airport," he suggested.

"Okay, there's a dance hall about six blocks down."

He let her select the direction without seeming to lag. He meant to wait until she led him to the vicinity of the field, then become increasingly insulting until she stalked off and left him flat.

"I bet Zella's glad her old boss got impeached. I bet that's why she decided to come back. Was that the reason?"

"Huh? Her boss?"

"Sure, Commissioner Ethel Robbins of Eugenics — didn't you know Zella used to work there? I thought you two were old friends."

"Uh — not old. Robbins, you said, huh?"

She jabbed him with her elbow. "Don't be dumb: You heard about the impeachment. Sam, I don't think you half-listen to me."

"Sure I do, Sugar."

So Zella's boss had been fired, he thought. That made things different. Maybe she'd change her mind about playing the colonel's game now. Maybe she'd even turn the coat twice and tell the colonel's plans to the committee. But that was of no concern to Sam

Wuncie. He had to go on alone, take a chance that the colonel would keep his promise if he delivered the goods. Gloomily he thought of himself as king's pawn being offered for a gambit.

Two blocks away he could see the high wire fence that surrounded the air-field. It was about time to get rid of the gushing, slightly tipsy Loretta. He took her arm firmly, but she leaned against him and purred. He pressed her into a dark entrance-way and kissed her rudely. Instead of belting him, she snuggled, hooked her arms around his neck, and kissed him back. For a moment, he was at a loss.

"I like you, Sam," she whispered, giggling in his ear.

Desperately, he tried a very blunt tactic. But she insisted on cooperating.

"Not here," she whispered. "You have a roommate?"

"Yeah."

"Me too — darn it."

He had a sudden hunch. "Let's take a walk on the airport. You can get inside."

"You can't though, can you? — I mean —" She snickered again. "I know a way. Come on."

There was a gate at the end of the street, and he could see a turnstile with an identity unit. The stile offered a continuous barrier from head to toe, and it was closed at the top.

"I don't see —"

"Just watch," she snickered as they approached it. She produced her identity disk and dropped it in the slot. The unit mused over it for a time, then croaked, "Pass Iggleby." The turnstile lock clicked, and a motor purred.

"Bend over," she said to Sam.

"What?"

"Bend over. I'll ride you piggy back."

Mystified, he obeyed.

"Waiting," said the unit.

"Now step on the platform."

With Loretta clinging to his back, he stepped into the 'stile, and the platform was covered with metal studs that seemed to depress when he stepped on them. The platform began to revolve.

"These gate-units are dumb, aren't they," she said in his ear. "All they can do is count feet."

The turnstile stopped and they walked onto the airport. Across a narrow strip of grass was a concrete ramp, immersed in darkness. They crossed to it, and he kissed her again to keep her going. It was beginning to be fun, and he regretted the fact. He had more to do than make love to a plump and affable blonde.

Floodlights spilled in front of several hangars, but they kept to the shadows in the rear.

"Know where we're going?" she asked.

"Uh . . ." He indicated a nearby hangar. "What's in there?"

"Engine-changes, repairs."

"How about the next one?"

She paused. "I remember, because I was on duty this morning when they towed it in."

"Well?"

"Let me think. Uh . . . an old C-54."

"In for repairs?"

"No, just to get it out of the gale. Why?"

"No reason. Come on."

"In there? But that's restricted."

"It's not guarded, is it?"

"No, but —"

"Then come on."

"Sam, I'm scared!" She hung back, and her voice had a "what-am-I-doing-here?" note, as if her supply of gin was wearing thin.

"Come here." He pulled her close.

The rear entrance to the hangar was locked, but a window wasn't. He pried it open and they slipped into darkness. But a sliver of light from the floods in front of the building gradually made the gloom less impenetrable, and he peered at the dark shadow-shape of the old transport plane from two years ago. He paused, wondering if he should knock the girl senseless now, or wait awhile. But he would have to haul her aboard the plane, and he might as well lead the lamb to a convenient spot.

She giggled as he opened the hatch. "This is awful, Sammm!"

He gave her a little pat to help her in, then climbed up behind

her and closed the hatch softly. Cool arms slipped around his neck. He unfurled his fist and decided to wait awhile.

"Saaaam!"

The wind died slowly. The vibration of the great building ceased. Loretta yawned sleepily and stretched on the heap of kapok cushions.

"We've gotta . . . leave before . . . daylight . . . Sam," she purred drowsily.

"After a while—it's a long night."

He remained motionless for a time, listening to her breathing. Soon she slept. He touched her face lightly. She remained asleep. He stole away quietly, trying to remember where a C-54 stowed its first-aid kits. He found one in the radio compartment, and two more on the flight deck. He extracted the morphine and the adhesive tape, then crept back to Loretta.

She whimpered when the needle stung her thigh, scratched at it sleepily, tried to push it away. Then she woke up, still whimpering.

"Sam! What are you doing?" She pawed at his hand.

"Stop it!" he said evenly. "You rolled on a little piece of wire. "I'll get it out."

He fed her the entire contents of the tube, then jerked the needle free.

"Sam! What did you do? What was that thing?"

"A sharp bit of wire, I told you!"

"It wasn't. It felt like a needle."

He chuckled. "You woke up dreaming, Sugar."

"Sam?"

"Huh?"

"Come here."

He came. Moments later she was asleep. He waited for the drug to take effect, then trussed her securely with the tape and gagged her. Occasionally she moaned, half-awakening, then falling into a drowse again. He covered her with a tarp, then went up to the flight deck. He inspected the controls briefly and checked the service report. The ship was fully serviced. He paused, thinking. With Zella along, it would be safer to wait for morning. But Zella was probably being interrogated right now, and she might decide to pull another switch. That would end the game then and there.

He climbed out of the pilot's compartment and lowered himself from the hatch. The hangar doors were motor-driven, folding upward. There would be a long delay between the time he opened the doors and the time he got the engines started. An even longer delay for taxiing to the end of the runway. If armed guards policed the field, there would be ample time for them to have a shot at him. Or more likely, they would simply block off the runway and

try to make takeoff impossible.

He needed a legitimate excuse for taxiing the ship out of the hangar. He went looking for one, prowling along the walls of the hangar, browsing through equipment and tools. He found two acetylene welders and dragged them to the locked door of a small tool room that appeared to have no windows to the outside. The door had a small glass window; he pressed a kapok cushion against it, then struck the cushion with his fist. The breaking was almost soundless. He shut off one pair of cylinders tightly, then chopped the torch-mounting from the hoses and fed them through the shattered window, tossing their severed ends toward the far side of the tool room.

Pulling up the second rig, he cracked the acetylene line and lit a long yellow flame. He fed it just enough oxygen to take the brightness out of it, then hung the nozzle through the window, just inside the room. For the moment, he left the severed lines off, and went to find a box of waste, which he scattered in front of the door and soaked with oil. He cracked the valves on the severed lines then, and briefly watched the slight pressure drop. There might be very little time.

He darted toward the front of the hangar, threw the switch to hoist the doors, started the alarm bell, and caught up the phone to

scream a hasty call to the automatic switchboard: "Fire in hangar three! Fire in hangar three!" He left the phone dangling and sprinted for the ship. The hangar doors were rolling up as he clambered through the hatch, and the building was being searchlighted from the control tower.

A loudspeaker was blaring across the field: "*What's the trouble over there? Hangar three! Guard units, investigate —*"

The speaker stopped suddenly. Evidently the switchboard had relayed the fire-call.

Scrambling into the cockpit, Sam kicked on the battery switches and started the inverter. Then he growled a low curse; he had forgotten to pull the props through. Unwilling to risk a locked cylinder, he nudged the starters on the outside engines, not firing them, but turning them through a few times. A siren was blaring from across the ramp.

One engine coughed, then kicked to life. Then he tried the second. It coughed, but refused. He tried again.

A sudden flare of light came from behind, and the blast of the explosion shuddered through the ship. The second engine started. If he still had a tail-assembly, he was all right. Releasing the brakes, he eased the ship ahead. Two men in mechanics' uniforms were racing across the ramp. One came

front and center to signal him out. Sam grinned. The 54's ground crew probably, figuring some neighboring grease-monkey was rescuing their boat. A fire truck screeched to a halt on the ramp, and helmeted figures darted toward the inferno.

Sam taxied a hundred yards ahead and looked back. Nobody was even watching the aircraft, although the tower occasionally threw a searchlight on him, evidently trying to tell him to cut on the command set for taxi instructions. A follow-me jeep was darting toward him, but he looked around for a runway, spotted the center of one, and headed for it across rough ground. The searchlight behaved frantically. The follow-me jeep skidded to a stop and took off after the ship. Out of curiosity, Sam switched on the command set.

"... the damn ship back on the strip! What's the damn crazy idea of —"

He shut it off. The ship got on the runway after much rough maneuvering. He glanced at the windsock's outline of tiny glistening reflectors, then turned right, started the other engines, lowered the flaps, set the brakes, and eased the throttles forward. The follow-me jeep whirred up in a cloud of mud-particles, started in front of the poised aircraft, thought better of the idea, and backed up quickly. Far up ahead, a car's headlights

were racing for the strip.

He released the brakes and gave it full throttle. He had only half a runway, but a fairly strong headwind. The ship gathered speed. A truck roared onto the runway. A man leaped out and waved his arms wildly. Sam gritted his teeth and kept going. The man was waving a pistol. Guards with rifles scrambled out of the truck.

Then they scrambled off the runway in a last-minute dive. The truck roared frantically for safety. Sam hit the ailerons, trying to bounce a wingtip over the fleeing vehicle. He narrowly missed a ground-loop and thundered on. Sharp ringing sounds told him rifle bullets were punching through the fuselage.

Then he was airborne, with wheels and flaps folding beneath him, and he breathed quiet relief as he leveled off at low altitude and headed south along the coastline. A hint of dawn was graying in the east.

Fearing fighter interception, he flew just below the overcast, ready at any moment to dart upward into the vapor shroud. But evidently the city's small air-force had been caught unprepared.

After forty minutes, the sunrise revealed Merritt Island just ahead, and the cluster of buildings that was Titusville. He banked right and flew a heading of 270° until, nestled in the Florida lake

country, Orlando lay beneath him. He circled the airport, wagging his wings until a group of men appeared near the runway and began waving. Then he came in for a landing.

He could not of course expect the colonel, for the trip that had taken him less than an hour would involve several days on horseback. A man in paratrooper's boots, wearing no insignia, approached him as he climbed out of the ship, and introduced himself as Captain Parrin. He seemed to accept Wuncie with a certain amount of respect, which seemed to suggest that he had not yet heard that the pilot was a prisoner of circumstances, rather than a willing volunteer.

"There's a girl tied up in the back of the ship," he told Parrin. "She's to be well treated, and not regarded as a prisoner."

The captain assured him that she would be taken care of, and sent two men to get her out of the ship.

"I had no word from Colonel Mac that you were coming, Wuncie. Unless you brought orders, we'll have to wait for a courier."

Sam frowned at the northern sky. "They'll send out search planes to look for a ship. They'll find it, and strafe it on the ground. You want to wait?"

"The colonel wouldn't like—"

"Apparently the colonel isn't much of a strategist."

The captain reddened slightly and coughed. "He was, I understand, a public relations officer during the war."

Sam grinned sourly. "Yeah—well, we don't have to wait a week. Get your boys loaded up. I understand you've already got the plan of action. All you need is a time to start it, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"There are a few extra chutes in the plane. Carry an extra man. We'll drop him with a flare-pistol and a message for MacMahon — over South Jacksonville. We'll set the time ourselves. If it's okay with the colonel, your boy can shoot a green flare — while we're circling."

Parrin hesitated. "Well, we're supposed to wait until dark."

"Okay, we'll wait till tonight. But we've got to hide the ship."

"That's no trouble. Just taxi it into the hangar."

During the day Sam had a chance to observe the men that formed the small task-force. They were a rough-looking bunch, surly and grim — typical, he thought, of free-lance fighters of all generations. They were too restless and impatient to fit into a technological civilization or, rather, their restlessness took an overt physical form; but neither were they pastoral types that wanted security. He had a vague notion that if MacMahon's grandiose plan ever worked, it would not be the placid

rural folk who triumphed. For the true rurals were not fighting their own battle. They tended their cabbage patches and grumbled about the system, but they adapted to it admirably.

Several times during the day, aircraft droned overhead. One ship, a twin-engine bomber, made three passes over the field, evidently taking pictures. And the skid marks of Wuncie's landing were still black on the white concrete runway.

Twilight came. The men were loaded aboard the ship. Half of them were carrying rifles; evidently they had scoured the peninsula for a few remaining rounds of ammunition. Several had grenades, and Sam knew that they had some dynamite.

Parrin sat in the co-pilot's seat after they were airborne, and he went over the plan with Wuncie as they winged northward.

"We're to drop three men as close as we can get them to the



north end of St. John's bridge. They're to capture the bridge guard-shack while the colonel's ground forces keep the guards occupied from the south. All the men we could muster will drive across the bridge and disperse throughout the city. They're to steal weapons and assemble later at the water front. But their real purpose is their nuisance value. They'll keep the techs busy rounding them up until we can make a drop near the power station and another near the Central Coordinator vaults. Once we get them knocked out, the city's ripe for plucking."

What then? Sam wondered, but nodded agreeably.

"Better call your messenger, Parrin. South Jax is just ahead."

The captain nodded and left the cockpit. A moment later he returned with a small heavy-set man who glanced questioningly at Wuncie. Sam handed him the ship's flare-pistol.

"You know where to find Colonel Mac?" he called.

The man nodded.

"When I blink the warning light, hit the silk. We'll circle until you make contact." He glanced at Parrin. "You give him the message?"

"He's got it written. I suggested eleven o'clock."

Sam glanced at his watch. "It's nine now. That doesn't give him much time to get ready. We've

got just about six hours' fuel."

"Want to make it later?"

He thought about it for a moment. Then he got a message from the courier and added a notation: *Flare code as follows: Red-red, return to base; green-green, eleven o'clock; green-yellow, midnight; yellow-yellow, one o'clock; red-yellow, two o'clock; red-green, land at South Jax for contact.*

He gave the courier a double handful of assorted flare-cartridges and showed the note to Parrin. The captain nodded.

"That should keep Colonel Mac from blowing his top."

"Time's right!" Sam called to the courier. "Get the hatch off and get ready."

The man nodded and left the cockpit. Moments later, a dull roar announced that the hatch was open to the slip-stream.

The bright lights of the tech city glowed across the river, but South Jax remained in blackness, and he could locate it only by estimating distance from the lighted river-bridge. He flew southwest at three thousand feet. When the bridge was on his right at a declination of about 45°, he hit a switch to blink the warning light. Parrin darted from the cockpit. Moments later, he returned with word that the courier had bailed out at the proper time.

"Now to wait," Sam grunted.

The captain was watching the

lights of the city with hungry eyes. "Wonder if they've spotted us yet?" he muttered on the interphone.

"Probably. I don't expect this crazy scheme to succeed."

Parrin glanced at him sharply. "Then why are you in on it?"

He smiled bitterly. "MacMahon bought me."

The captain nodded and returned his gaze to the city. He neglected to ask Sam's purchase price; a man's price, after all, was his own business.

The pilot went down to five-hundred feet, circling low to the southeast of the bridge, and hoping that he would escape detection by aircraft locator devices. But if they had bothered to re-rig the wartime radar, they had probably been tracking him for some time.

Fifteen minutes passed. Still no bright signal appeared from the darkness below. They circled and waited. Parrin seemed to be growing restless.

A yellow flash appeared suddenly at ten-o'clock-low, and then another.

"There it is!" Parrin shouted. "Double-yellow flare."

Sam cursed abruptly and banked hard right, jerking the ship into a tight spiraling climb.

"What's wrong? There was the flare!"

"Yeah! Hundred and fifty millimeter flares!"

"What?"

"Flak, Junior. You're too young to remember. Hold your hat. They might start throwing something worse."

"What'll we do?"

"Play clay pigeon!" he snapped, nosing her down again. "Wait for Caesar to make up his little mind."

More bright bursts were blossoming about them. Parrin tugged his steel helmet down and slunk low in his seat. Sam went down to a hundred and fifty feet and hoped for no high buildings.

Evidently the sound of the heavy guns spurred the colonel to decision. A pair of green fireballs appeared to their left and drifted earthward.

"Eleven o'clock!" he shouted, and swung quickly around to a southeasterly heading.

The barrage ceased as they left the vicinity of the city. Sam switched on the command set and listened to Jacksonville tower.

"Leadnightflight from Control, stay in the vicinity of the city. Circle at your assigned altitudes. Do not pursue. I say again: do not pursue. Over."

Sam swallowed hard. He could hear no answer to the message, for the aircraft transmitted on a different frequency from Control. But "Leadnightflight" meant "flight-leader, night-fighter flight." They had been in somebody's gunsights while circling over South Jax, and evidently the flak had only been

a warning. He glanced at Parrin. The captain's jackbox was still on interphone; he had not heard the message.

The tower spoke again. "Wuncie in C-54, this is Jacksonville Control, this is Jacksonville Control. We have been calling you. Are you listening yet? Over."

Sam stiffened. They knew his name. That meant Zella had switched sides again. The techs knew MacMahon's plans, and the plot was ruined. He turned to Parrin, then paused. *Wait awhile*, he decided.

He switched to interphone and spoke calmly. "They might have night-fighters after us, Parrin. Go back to the navigation blister, will you? Watch high and to the rear."

Parrin started up, then paused. "There's no moon. How'll I see?"

"You can see a twenty-millimeter cannon when it shoots at you. You can see a rocket burst, can't you? Keep your jackbox on interphone. Call me if you see anything."

"Check." He slipped out and closed the compartment door.

When he was gone, Sam switched to command again. The voice was fainter.

"... if you hear me, answer please. Wuncie from Jax Control, answer please. Over."

He keyed the transmitter and spoke slowly. "Hello, Jax, this is

Wuncie. I read you. Speak your piece. Over."

The voice came back excited. "Listen, Wuncie — this is Commissioner Jenkins. We know the whole plan and your part in it. Believe me, you haven't a chance. We have the colonel's headquarters pinpointed, and we could drop a plutonium bomb down there if we wanted to. We still have a small stockpile. But we don't want trouble with the rurals. We never have wanted it. We need to cooperate. But if you try to make your drops over the city, we'll cut you down. We could have done so already. Pause for acknowledgement. Over."

"Acknowledge your message. Are you aware of my situation? Over."

"Wuncie from Jenkins. Understand your position. However, it seems possible that you were deluded. Zella Richmond claims that she pleaded with MacMahon to use distilled water, with only a pretense of rabid saliva. Whether or not this was done, she does not know. She believes Harlich actually wanted to infect you. On the other hand, she says that the dog in question had not definitely been proved rabid. They were holding it for observation. You may or may not be infected. On the other hand, if you attempt to make your drops, you will most certainly be shot down. Acknowledge, please. Over."

"Wait," he said, and switched to interphone. "Parrin, you still there?"

"Check," the captain called. "Nothing yet."

"Okay. But stay there."

He switched back to command, having assured himself that Parrin wasn't eavesdropping.

"Okay, Jenkins, got your message. You have any suggestions?"

There was a brief pause. "Are you under duress at the moment?"

"Not at the moment. But I will be, if I try anything."

"It's your problem. Just stay away from the city."

Sam thought about it for a moment. He needed Jenkins' help to save his own skin, but the commissioner wasn't interested in charity.

"Jenkins from Wuncie. How about the ship? Wouldn't you like to get it back? Over."

Another pause. "Maybe, but that's not too important. Go on. What do you have in mind?"

"Let me make my drops. You be ready for them. You know the schedule."

Jenkins hesitated. "I don't know. I'll talk it over with the others. I don't think I trust you, Wuncie. You might change the schedule."

"If I did, you could have a night-fighter on my tail, couldn't you?"

"I'll call you back."

"Roger and out."

Sam kept the ship out to sea, gradually gaining altitude, and keeping within command-set range of Jacksonville. He switched to interphone and called Parrin. The captain reported that he had seen nothing.

"I might as well sit down," he said. "If they were after us, we'd have seen them by now."

"Not necessarily. I wish you'd stick there for awhile. Otherwise, we wouldn't know until we got hit."

Parrin grumbled, but agreed. Sam switched back to command and settled down to wait. He felt around on the floor of the compartment, hoping to find a used cigaret butt. His hand brushed something rubbery. He picked it up. An oxygen mask. Idly curious, he plugged it in and opened the valve, holding it against his cheek. It was working. He glanced at the oxygen pressure indicator and saw that it was well up.

"Wuncie, this is Jenkins. Are you reading me? Over."

"Read you loud and clear. Go ahead."

"We can't do it. You'll have to worm out of it the best you can. We'd like to have the ship back, but we can't allow you over the city. If you make the drops, people would get killed — some of our people. We're going to make damn sure that if anybody gets killed, it'll be the occupants of that aircraft. That's all. I pre-

sume the others don't know your situation. Better tell them. They'll realize they have to call it off."

"And I'll be their prisoner, and won't get the damn serum anyway."

"That's your worry. You got yourself into it. I'm sorry."

A woman's voice broke in, and he recognized it as Zella. "Do what he says, Sam. I don't believe Larwich really infected you. Of course—I know what you must think about me, but be sensible. You can't make the drops."

"So I can't. Stick around the tower, will you? I may want to call back. Over."

"Wilco. We'll wait half an hour."

He cut off the set. He set the autopilot and stepped back to lock the compartment door. He found a second oxygen tank and cut the hose to make it useless. Then he returned to the cockpit and put the ship in a climb. At nine thousand feet, Parrin called him.

"Why so high, Wuncie? What's the idea?"

"I want to get up high enough to see the city's lights. We're pretty far out. Don't want to get lost. There aren't any beams, you know."

Parrin grumbled and fell silent. At twelve thousand feet, Sam put on the oxygen mask. Ten minutes

later, the altimeter read seventeen thousand.

"Listen, Wuncie," said the interphone. "I'm getting dizzy. How high are we? I've got to sit down."

"Fifteen thousand. What's the matter. You got a weak heart?"

"Hell, no!" Parrin growled irritably. "But I don't see any reason for it. You can see Jacksonville now."

"I'll level off in a minute."

"Well, I'm sitting down."

"Okay."

He reduced his rate of climb, but continued upward to twenty-one thousand. He stayed there for a few minutes.

"Listen, Wuncie," the interphone gasped suddenly. "Two of my boys passed out. Come down!"

"I can take it," he jeered. "Why can't you?"

"You come down—or I'm coming up there—and—"

Sam nosed the ship sharply down until he felt weightless. Then he dragged back hard on the wheel. He judged two-and-a-half gees by the sag of his jaw—maybe enough jolt to knock Parrin down.

"We went down a little, Parrin. How's that?"

There was no immediate answer. Then a bullet crashed through the compartment door and punctured the fuselage over his head. He sank low in the seat and climbed as rapidly as possible.

Someone began beating on the compartment door. He could hear faint shouting. At twenty-six thousand the sounds stopped. He leveled off and set the autopilot. He climbed out of the cockpit and opened the compartment door. A light was on in the back of the ship. One man was crawling slowly toward him, gasping for air. Most of them were out.

Sam grabbed a walk-around bottle, plugged his mask into it, and started back through the ship, stepping over bodies in the aisle. The crawler collapsed. Parrin lay in a heap under the observation blister. Sam collected weapons and heaved all but one rifle out through the open hatch. He took the rifle and hurried back to the cockpit, lest he descend finally with forty dead men.

He dove rapidly to ten thousand feet and set the autopilot again. He got the compartment

door open as Parrin was staggering toward it. The captain saw the rifle and stopped, cursing fluently. Others were awake, and crowding angrily into the aisle. He suddenly doubted whether one rifle could cow forty men. Fortunately, only half were awake.

“Start bailing out!” he bellowed. “In thirty seconds, I start shooting.”

Five men were gone before Parrin shouted, “Stay where you are, men! He won’t shoot.”

They hesitated. Sam’s finger tightened on the trigger. There was nothing else to do. The rifle crashed. Parrin went down screaming on a broken leg.

“Get going!” Sam bawled. “We’re over land.”

They crowded toward the hatch and went through it in rapid sequence. Others were coming awake to stare dumbly at the proceedings. One man woke up and evidently thought he was over Jack-



“Would you mind telling him to hurry?”

sonville. He blinked stupidly.

"Hey, Corporal!" he shouted, "I'm on your team! Wait!"

The corporal didn't wait. The man dove after him.

A few minutes later, only the sleeping and the bewildered remained.

"Get those guys awake!" he demanded.

Still uncomprehending, they worked over their partners until only three sleepers remained.

"I think this guy's dead, Wuncie."

"Then let him alone. He might be hard to wake."

But when he got the rest of them out, he stepped over the moaning, cursing Parrin and went back to check the allegedly dead. Two faces were tinted with Paris green, but everybody lived. He unsnapped their chute packs and took them with him, to insure that they stayed aboard. Then he went back to call Jacksonville Tower. Jenkins was still waiting.

"Jenkins, I'm coming in to land at the airport."

"Come over the city, we shoot you down," was the stern reply.

He explained the situation, then asked: "Have you got my blip on the radar scope?"

"Yes, we've been watching it."

"I'm coming to the edge of the city and circle. You don't trust me, okay. Get one of your night-fighters on my tail. Have him ride me in at whatever range he shoots

best. If a parachute pops out, he clobbers me. Is that fair?"

The commissioner thought about it. "Maybe. How would you come in?"

"Straight approach. No base leg. The hell with the wind. I'll pick a strip that won't carry me over the city. My God, Jenkins. What more do you want?"

"A reason."

"Didn't get you. Say again."

"A reason why you want to land here. I think if I were in your boots, Wuncie, I'd run for some little airport in the sticks."

"Why?"

"We're a little irritated with you, to put it mildly."

Sam chuckled. "Did you ever watch the colonel's men hang a guy feet down over a bonfire? I doubt if you're that irritated."

"Well, come on in. We're glad to get the ship back. But we don't want you — unless, of course, you want to take our entrance tests and can pass them."

He swung the ship northeast toward the pool of light. He thought about it a moment.

"I want some information, Jenkins."

"Shoot."

"What are you testing for, anyway? And why? Just like to play king of the heap?"

"We test for just two things, Wuncie. The basic, genetically fundamental attitude of the organ-

ism to his environment, and his general ability to analyze. We only screen out the extremes: the blindly aggressive and the completely passive. MacMahon is one extreme; a farmer who's completely happy hoeing corn is the other. We don't want the former. And the latter doesn't want in anyway. As far as analyzing ability is concerned, we don't want morons — but that's about all."

"What about this branding business, man? That's ridiculous. You know what happens to those people, don't you?"

"Yes, and we're sorry about it. You must remember, Wuncie, they agree to the condition before they take the test. The rural persecution of them will have to stop, because there are getting to be a lot of them. They're banding together. Eventually they'll run MacMahon's kind out. That's why we do it. We're giving him a minority group to bully, but we help the minority group. We dropped several cases of arms to a bunch over in Gainesville."

"Aren't you afraid they'll use the arms on you?"

"We're not worried about it. After all, Wuncie, if it weren't for fanatics like MacMahon, we could work out a cooperative solution. We're perfectly willing to trade industrial goods for foodstuffs and raw materials that the rurals can raise. Some of the northern sectors have done it. Really, Wuncie

— some men just aren't cut out for industrial civilization. The fact that they were in one, tried desperately to adjust to it, and failed — that's what caused wars and full asylums and such. They really don't want technology, but they try to want it, because it exists. We want to create two societies, mutually dependent, one pastoral, one technological — and let men go where their abilities send them. Then we won't have a potential engineer chopping cotton, or a yokel repairing a servo-mechanism with a sledge-hammer, or a paranoid running for governor."

"Sounds lovely," Sam grunted. "But it doesn't seem right."

"Right? Who said it was? We think it's *workable*."

"You've got all the answers?"

"Uh-uh, Wuncie. We're lucky to have a few hints. What is an answer, anyway?"

"Something that works, I guess."

"The city's working, isn't it?"

He stared at the glare of the lights as the ship dropped toward it. He nodded to his unseen host, eyed the night-fighter that buzzed low over him as a signal, then racked back to get on his tail.

"Yeah, it's working," he grunted. "But where is it going?"

"Look up, Wuncie."

Jenkins probably meant to call his attention to the night-fighter. But he glanced upward anyway — and the stars glittered brightly, despite the city's glare.

THE COMMUTER

By PHILIP K. DICK

Ever hear of the little man who wasn't there? Pretty small peck of potatoes compared to what you'll run into in this story! Take it from Bob Paine, a vice-president on one of our local railroads. Bob's duties had to do with the commuter trains: those ambulatory Holes of Calcutta that carry millions of sardine-packed humans to and from work twice a day, five days a week. As trouble-shooter, Bob thought he had come up against just about every possible type of complaint — until he met Ernest Critchet, one of the railroad's best customers. It seems Mr. Critchet had a very unique problem: how could he get to his home town when it had never even existed?

That was only the beginning. Before Paine was through working on the case, his own personal life became involved — although it took a train ride, a soda fountain and a crying baby to convince him that he was in this one up to his neck!

THE little fellow was tired. He pushed his way slowly through the throng of people, across the lobby of the station, to the ticket window. He waited his turn impatiently, fatigue showing in his drooping shoulders, his sagging brown coat.

"Next," Ed Jacobson, the ticket seller, rasped.

The little fellow tossed a five dollar bill on the counter. "Give me a new commute book. Used up the old one." He peered past Jacobson at the wall



Illustrator: Bill Ashman

clock. "Lord, is it really that late?"

Jacobson accepted the five dollars. "Okay, mister. One commute book. Where to?"

"Macon Heights," the little fellow stated.

"Macon Heights." Jacobson consulted his board. "Macon Heights. There isn't any such place."

The little man's face hardened in suspicion. "You trying to be funny?"

"Mister, there isn't any Macon Heights. I can't sell you a ticket unless there is such a place."

"What do you mean? I live there!"

"I don't care. I've been selling tickets for six years and there is no such place."

The little man's eyes popped with astonishment. "But I have a home there. I go there every night. I —"

"Here." Jacobson pushed him his chart board. "You find it."

The little man pulled the board over to one side. He studied it frantically, his finger trembling as he went down the list of towns.

"Find it?" Jacobson demanded, resting his arms on the counter. "It's not there, is it?"

The little man shook his head, dazed. "I don't understand. It doesn't make sense. Something must be wrong. There certainly must be some —"

Suddenly he vanished. The

board fell to the cement floor. The little fellow was gone — winked out of existence.

"Holy Caesar's Ghost," Jacobson gasped. His mouth opened and closed. There was only the board lying on the cement floor.

The little man had ceased to exist.

"What then?" Bob Paine asked.

"I went around and picked up the board."

"He was really gone?"

"He was gone, all right." Jacobson mopped his forehead. "I wish you had been around. Like a light he went out. Completely. No sound. No motion."

Paine lit a cigarette, leaning back in his chair. "Had you ever seen him before?"

"No."

"What time of day was it?"

"Just about now. About five." Jacobson moved toward the ticket window. "Here comes a bunch of people."

"Macon Heights." Paine turned the pages of the State city guide. "No listing in any of the books. If he reappears I want to talk to him. Get him inside the office."

"Sure. I don't want to have nothing to do with him. It isn't natural." Jacobson turned to the window. "Yes, lady."

"Two round trip tickets to Lewisburg."

Paine stubbed his cigarette out and lit another. "I keep feeling

"I've heard the name before." He got up and wandered over to the wall map. "But it isn't listed."

"There is no listing because there is no such place," Jacobson said. "You think I could stand here daily, selling one ticket after another, and not know?" He turned back to his window. "Yes, sir."

"I'd like a commute book to Macon Heights," the little fellow said, glancing nervously at the clock on the wall. "And hurry it up."

Jacobson closed his eyes. He hung on tight. When he opened his eyes again the little fellow was still there. Small wrinkled face. Thinning hair. Glasses. Tired, slumped coat.

Jacobson turned and moved across the office to Paine. "He's back." Jacobson swallowed, his face pale. "It's him again."

Paine's eyes flickered. "Bring him right in."

Jacobson nodded and returned to his window. "Mister," he said, "could you please come inside?" He indicated the door. "The Vice-President would like to see you for a moment."

The little man's face darkened. "What's up? The train's about to take off." Grumbling under his breath, he pushed the door open and entered the office. "This sort of thing has never happened before. It's certainly getting hard

to purchase a commute book. If I miss the train I'm going to hold your company --"

"Sit down," Paine said, indicating the chair across from his desk. "You're the gentleman who came a commute book to Macon Heights?"

"Is there something wrong about that? What's the matter with all of you? Why can't you sell me a commute book like you always do?"

"Like -- like we *always* do?"

The little man held himself in check with great effort. "Last December my wife and I moved out to Macon Heights. I've been riding your train ten times a week, twice a day, for six months. Every month I buy a new commute book."

Paine leaned toward him. "Exactly which one of our trains do you take, Mr. —"

"Critchet. Ernest Critchet. The B train. Don't you know your own schedules?"

"The B train?" Paine consulted a B train chart, running his pencil along it. No Macon Heights was listed. "How long is the trip? How long does it take?"

"Exactly forty-nine minutes." Critchet looked up at the wall clock. "If I ever get on it."

Paine calculated mentally. Forty-nine minutes. About thirty miles from the city. He got up and crossed to the big wall map.

"What's wrong?" Critchet

asked with marked suspicion.

Paine drew a thirty-mile circle on the map. The circle crossed a number of towns, but none of them was Macon Heights. And on the B line there was nothing at all.

"What sort of place is Macon Heights?" Paine asked. "How many people, would you say?"

"I don't know. Five thousand, maybe. I spend most of my time in the city. I'm a bookkeeper over at Bradshaw Insurance."

"Is Macon Heights a fairly new place?"

"It's modern enough. We have a little two-bedroom house, a couple years old." Critchet stirred restlessly. "How about my commute book?"

"I'm afraid," Paine said slowly, "I can't sell you a commute book."

"What? Why not?"

"We don't have any service to Macon Heights."

Critchet leaped up. "What do you mean?"

"There's no such place. Look at the map yourself."

Critchet gaped, his face working. Then he turned angrily to the wall map, glaring at it intently.

"This is a curious situation, Mr. Critchet," Paine murmured. "It isn't on the map, and the State city directory doesn't list it. We have no schedule that includes it. There are no commute books

made up for it. We don't —"

He broke off. Critchet had vanished. One moment he was there, studying the wall map. The next moment he was gone. Vanished. Puffed out.

"Jacobson!" Paine barked. "He's gone!"

Jacobson's eyes grew large. Sweat stood out on his forehead. "So he is," he murmured.

Paine was deep in thought, gazing at the empty spot Ernest Critchet had occupied. "Something's going on," he muttered. "Something damn strange." Abruptly he grabbed his overcoat and headed for the door.

"Don't leave me alone!" Jacobson begged.

"If you need me I'll be at Laura's apartment. The number's some place in my desk."

"This is no time for games with girls."

Paine pushed open the door to the lobby. "I doubt," he said grimly, "if this is a game."

Paine climbed the stairs to Laura Nichols' apartment two at a time. He leaned on the buzzer until the door opened.

"Bob!" Laura blinked in surprise. "To what do I owe this —"

Paine pushed past her, inside the apartment. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, but —"

"Big doings. I'm going to need some help. Can I count on you?"

"On me?" Laura closed the

door after him. Her attractively furnished apartment lay in half shadow. At the end of the deep green couch a single table lamp burned. The heavy drapes were pulled. The phonograph was on low in the corner.

"Maybe I'm going crazy." Paine threw himself down on the luxuriant green couch. "That's what I want to find out."

"How can I help?" Laura came languidly over, her arms folded, a cigarette between her lips. She shook her long hair back out of her eyes. "Just what did you have in mind?"

Paine grinned at the girl appreciatively. "You'll be surprised. I want you to go downtown tomorrow morning bright and early and —"

"Tomorrow morning! I have a job, remember? And the office starts a whole new string of reports this week."

"The hell with that. Take the morning off. Go downtown to the main library. If you can't get the information there, go over to the county court house and start looking through the back tax records. Keep looking until you find it."

"It? Find what?"

Paine lit a cigarette thoughtfully. "Mention of a place called Macon Heights. I know I've heard the name before. Years ago. Got the picture? Go through the old atlases. Old newspapers in the

reading room. Old magazines. Reports. City proposals. Propositions before the State legislature."

Laura sat down slowly on the arm of the couch. "Are you kidding?"

"No."

"How far back?"

"Maybe ten years — if necessary."

"Good Lord! I might have to —"

"Stay there until you find it." Paine got up abruptly. "I'll see you later."

"You're leaving? You're not taking me out to dinner?"

"Sorry." Paine moved toward the door. "I'll be busy. Real busy."

"Doing what?"

"Visiting Macon Heights."

Outside the train endless fields stretched off, broken by an occasional farm building. Bleak telephone poles jutted up toward the evening sky.

Paine glanced at his wrist watch. Not far, now. The train passed through a small town. A couple of gas stations, roadside stands, television store. It stopped at the station, brakes grinding. Lewisburg. A few commuters got off, men in overcoats with evening papers. The doors slammed and the train started up.

Paine settled back against his seat, deep in thought. Critchet had vanished while looking at the

wall map. He had vanished the first time when Jacobson showed him the chart board. — When he had been shown there was no such place as Macon Heights. Was there some sort of clue there? The whole thing was unreal, dream-like.

Paine peered out. He was almost there — if there were such a place. Outside the train the brown fields stretched off endlessly. Hills and level fields. Telephone poles. Cars racing along the State highway, tiny black specks hurrying through the twilight.

But no sign of Macon Heights.

The train roared on its way. Paine consulted his watch. Fifty-one minutes had passed. And he had seen nothing. Nothing but fields.

He walked up the car and sat down beside the conductor, a white-haired old gentleman. "Ever heard of a place called Macon Heights?" Paine asked.

"No sir."

Paine showed his identification. "You're sure you never heard of any place by that name?"

"Positive, Mr. Paine."

"How long have you been on this run?"

"Eleven years, Mr. Paine."

Paine rode on until the next stop, Jacksonville. He got off and transferred to a B train heading back to the city. The sun had set. The sky was almost black. Dimly, he could make out the scenery

out there beyond the window.

He tensed, holding his breath. One minute to go. Forty seconds. Was there anything? Level fields. Bleak telephone poles. A barren, wasted landscape between towns.

Between? The train rushed on, hurtling through the gloom. Paine gazed out fixedly. Was there something out there? Something beside the fields?

Above the fields a long mass of translucent smoke lay stretched out. A homogeneous mass, extended for almost a mile. What was it? Smoke from the engine? But the engine was diesel. From a truck along the highway? A brush fire? None of the fields looked burned.

Suddenly the train began to slow. Paine was instantly alert. The train was stopping, coming to a halt. The brakes screeched, the cars lurched from side to side. Then silence.

Across the aisle a tall man in a light coat got to his feet, put his hat on, and moved rapidly toward the door. He leaped down from the train, onto the ground. Paine watched him, fascinated. The man walked rapidly away from the train across the dark fields. He moved with purpose, heading toward the bank of gray haze.

The man rose. He was walking a foot off the ground. He turned to the right. He rose again, now — three feet off the ground. For a

moment he walked parallel to the ground, still heading away from the train. Then he vanished into the bank of haze. He was gone.

Paine hurried up the aisle. But already the train had begun gathering speed. The ground moved past outside. Paine located the conductor, leaning against the wall of the car, a pudding-faced youth.

"Listen," Paine grated. "What was that stop!"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"That stop! Where the hell were we?"

"We always stop there." Slowly, the conductor reached into his coat and brought out a handful of schedules. He sorted through them and passed one to Paine. "The B always stops at Macon Heights. Didn't you know that?"

"No!"

"It's on the schedule." The youth raised his pulp magazine again. "Always stops there. Always has. Always will."

Paine tore the schedule open. It was true. Macon Heights was listed between Jacksonville and Lewisburg. Exactly thirty miles from the city.

The cloud of gray haze. The vast cloud, gaining form rapidly. As if something were coming into existence. As a matter of fact, something *was* coming into existence.

Macon Heights!

He caught Laura at her apartment the next morning. She was sitting at the coffee table in a pale pink sweater and dark slacks. Before her was a pile of notes, a pencil and eraser, and a malted milk.

"How did you make out?" Paine demanded.

"Fine. I got your information."

"What's the story?"

"There was quite a bit of material." She patted the sheaf of notes. "I summed up the major parts for you."

"Let's have the summation."

"Seven years ago this August the county board of supervisors voted on three new suburban housing tracts to be set up outside the city. Macon Heights was one of them. There was a big debate. Most of the city merchants opposed the new tracts. Said they would draw too much retail business away from the city."

"Go on."

"There was a long fight. Finally two of the three tracts were approved. Waterville and Cedar Groves. But not Macon Heights."

"I see," Paine murmured thoughtfully.

"Macon Heights was defeated. A compromise; two tracts instead of three. The two tracts were built up right away. You know. We passed through Waterville one afternoon. Nice little place."

"But no Macon Heights."

"No. Macon Heights was given up."

Paine rubbed his jaw. "That's the story, then."

"That's the story. Do you realize I lose a whole half-day's pay because of this? You *have* to take me out, tonight. Maybe I should get another fellow. I'm beginning to think you're not such a good bet."

Paine nodded absently. "Seven years ago." All at once a thought came to him. "The vote! How close was the vote on Macon Heights?"

Laura consulted her notes. "The project was defeated by a single vote."

"A single vote. Seven years ago." Paine moved out into the hall. "Thanks, honey. Things are beginning to make sense. Lots of sense!"

He caught a cab out front. The cab raced him across the city, toward the train station. Outside, signs and streets flashed by. People and stores and cars.

His hunch had been correct. He *had* heard the name before. Seven years ago. A bitter county debate on a proposed suburban tract. Two towns approved; one defeated and forgotten.

But now the forgotten town was coming into existence — seven years later. The town and an undetermined slice of reality along with it. *Why?* Had something changed in the past? Had an

alteration occurred in some past continuum?

That seemed like the explanation. The vote had been close. Macon Heights had *almost* been approved. Maybe certain parts of the past were unstable. Maybe that particular period, seven years ago, had been critical. Maybe it had never completely "jelled". An odd thought: the past changing, after it had already happened.

Suddenly Paine's eyes focussed. He sat up quickly. Across the street was a store sign, half way along the block. Over a small, inconspicuous establishment. As the cab moved forward Paine peered to see.

BRADSHAW INSURANCE

[OR]

NOTARY PUBLIC

He pondered. Critchet's' place of business. Did it also come and go? Had it always been there? Something about it made him uneasy.

"Hurry it up," Paine ordered the driver. "Let's get going."

When the train slowed down at Macon Heights, Paine got quickly to his feet and made his way up the aisle to the door. The grinding wheels jerked to a halt and Paine leaped down onto the hot gravel siding. He looked around him.

In the afternoon sunlight, Macon Heights glittered and sparkled, its even rows of houses stretching out in all directions. In

the center of the town the marquee of a theater rose up.

A theater, even. Paine headed across the track toward the town. Beyond the train station was a parking lot. He stepped up onto the lot and crossed it, following a path past a filling station and onto a sidewalk.

He came out on the main street of the town. A double row of stores stretched out ahead of him. A hardware store. Two drug-stores. A dime store. A modern department store.

Paine walked along, hands in his pockets, gazing around him at Macon Heights. An apartment building stuck up, tall and fat. A janitor was washing down the front steps. Everything looked new and modern. The houses, the stores, the pavement and sidewalks. The parking meters. A brown-uniformed cop was giving a car a ticket. Trees, growing at intervals. Neatly clipped and pruned.

He passed a big supermarket. Out in front was a bin of fruit, oranges and grapes. He picked a grape and bit into it.

The grape was real, all right. A big black concord grape, sweet and ripe. Yet twenty-four hours ago there had been nothing here but a barren field.

Paine entered one of the drug-stores. He leafed through some magazines and then sat down at the counter. He ordered a cup of

coffee from the red-cheeked little waitress.

"This is a nice town," Paine said, as she brought the coffee.

"Yes, isn't it?"

Paine hesitated. "How — how long have you been working here?"

"Three months."

"Three months?" Paine studied the buxom little blonde. "You live here in Macon Heights?"

"Oh, yes."

"How long?"

"A couple years, I guess." She moved away to wait on a young soldier who had taken a stool down the counter.

Paine sat drinking his coffee and smoking, idly watching the people passing by outside. Ordinary people. Men and women, mostly women. Some had grocery bags and little wire carts. Automobiles drove slowly back and forth. A sleepy little suburban town. Modern, upper middle-class. A quality town. No slums here. Small, attractive houses. Stores with sloping glass fronts and neon signs.

Some high school kids burst into the drugstore, laughing and bumping into each other. Two girls in bright sweaters sat down next to Paine and ordered lime drinks. They chatted gaily, bits of their conversation drifting to him.

He gazed at them, pondering moodily. They were real, all right. Lipstick and red fingernails.

Sweaters and armloads of school books. Hundreds of high school kids, crowding eagerly into the drugstore.

Paine rubbed his forehead wearily. It didn't seem possible. Maybe he was out of his mind. The town was *real*. Completely real. It must have always existed. A whole town couldn't rise up out of nothing; out of a cloud of gray haze. Five thousand people, houses and streets and stores.

Stores. Bradshaw Insurance.

Stabbing realization chilled him. Suddenly he understood. It was spreading. Beyond Macon Heights. Into the city. The city was changing, too. Bradshaw Insurance. Critchet's place of business.

Macon Heights couldn't exist without warping the city. They interlocked. The five thousand people came from the city. Their jobs. Their lives. The city was involved.

But how much? How much was the city changing?

Paine threw a quarter on the counter and hurried out of the drugstore, toward the train station. He had to get back to the city. Laura, the change. Was she still there? Was his *own* life safe?

Fear gripped him. Laura, all his possessions, his plans, hopes and dreams. Suddenly Macon Heights was unimportant. His own world was in jeopardy. Only one thing

mattered, now. He had to make sure of it; make sure his own life was still there. Untouched by the spreading circle of change that was lapping out from Macon Heights.

"Where to, buddy?" the cab driver asked, as Paine came rushing out of the train station.

Paine gave him the address of the apartment. The cab roared out into traffic. Paine settled back nervously. Outside the window the streets and office buildings flashed past. White collar workers were already beginning to get off work, swelling out onto the sidewalks to stand in clumps at each corner.

How much had changed? He concentrated on a row of buildings. The big department store. Had that always been there? The little boot-black shop next to it. He had never noticed that before.

NORRIS HOME FURNISHINGS

He didn't remember *that*. But how could he be sure? He felt confused. How could he tell?

The cab let him off in front of the apartment house. Paine stood for a moment, looking around him. Down at the end of the block the owner of the Italian delicatessen was out putting up the awning. Had he ever noticed a delicatessen there before?

He could not remember.

What had happened to the big

meat market across the street? There was nothing but neat little houses; older houses that looked like they'd been there plenty long. Had a meat market ever been there? The houses *looked* solid.

In the next block the striped pole of a barbershop glittered. Had there always been a barbershop there?

Maybe it had always been there. Maybe, and maybe not. Everything was shifting. New things were coming into existence, others going away. The past was altering, and memory was tied to the past. How could he trust his memory? How could he be sure?

Terror gripped him. Laura. His world . . .

Paine raced up the front steps and pushed open the door of the apartment house. He hurried up the carpeted stairs to the second floor. The door of the apartment was unlocked. He pushed it open and entered, his heart in his mouth, praying silently.

The living room was dark and silent. The shades were half pulled. He glanced around wildly. The light blue couch, magazines on its arms. The low blonde-oak table. The television set. But the room was empty.

"Laura!" he gasped.

Laura hurried from the kitchen, eyes wide with alarm. "Bob! What are you doing home? Is anything the matter?"

Paine relaxed, sagging with relief. "Hello, honey." He kissed her, holding her tight against him. She was warm and substantial; completely real. "No, nothing's wrong. Everything's fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Paine took his coat off shakily and dropped it over the back of the couch. He wandered around the room, examining things, his confidence returning. His familiar blue couch, cigarette burns on its arms. His old ragged footstool. His desk where he did his work at night. His fishing rods leaning up against the wall behind the bookcase.

The big television set he had purchased only last month; that was safe, too.

Everything, all he owned, was untouched. Safe. Unharmed.

"Dinner won't be ready for half an hour," Laura murmured anxiously, unfastening her apron. "I didn't expect you home so early. I've just been sitting around all day. I did clean the stove. Some salesman left a sample of a new cleanser."

"That's okay." He examined a favorite Renoir print on the wall. "Take your time. It's good to see all these things again. I —"

From the bedroom a crying sound came. Laura turned quickly. "I guess we woke up Jimmy."

"Jimmy?"

Laura laughed. "Darling, don't

(Continued on page 161)



Illustrator: Bill Ashman

THE PHANTOM TRUCK DRIVER

By ROG PHILLIPS

"Hey, Frank! Heard the news? Captain Summers is back! Yeah, same old business: he's nutty as a pecan orchard. 'Course who can blame him for goin' off his rocker? Up front there, sluggin' it out with them screwball Junies. I never seen one myself, but the stories they tell about 'em — brother! New kind of warfare, all right, when your enemy starts lovin' you to death!"

"No, that's not what drove him batty. In the first place, you gotta understand that Captain Summers is — or at least was, anyway — a mighty level-headed guy. And don't worry about him havin' guts; he's got all any ten men could use. Way I hear it, he came up with some ridiculous idea that's supposed to explain what them Junies are up to. He's got it written out, I hear, but I never got a chance to read it. . . ."

It had started to rain during the night, and we learned why this place was called Glue Valley by the native Junies. The muck clung to boot soles in thick layers that grew thicker by half an inch with every step — until unpredictably it broke off, making you trip and sprawl full length in it. You came up with the mud coating your hands and clothes and equipment. And the smell . . .

But you kept on your feet in the trenches, and you used your handkerchief or your shirt tail to work the trigger of your tommy gun with your mud-crusted fingers.

And when a wave of Junies looked like it was going to sweep up to the trench, you used one more of your precious atom grenades, ducking down so the radiation didn't get you, and straightening up again to watch them topple over dead — dead

even before they started to fall.

They were like vermin, the Junies. Intelligent vermin, with guns made in their factories, with faces that portrayed bravery, fear, desperation, as they rushed against the wall of lead thrown at them.

Naked vermin. Not house-broken. Better informed on Shakespeare than you were, and having their offspring in litters of eight to sixteen.

You couldn't do anything with them. That was the trouble. You couldn't do anything but wipe them out. They learned your language and learned how to read it a matter of days. They overran your living quarters and read all your books and messed your floors. Their I.Q. and aptitude tests made you look sick. But they thought words were just words. They signed treaties and ignored them. They knew what you wanted and did what they wanted to do.

You locked them out and they unlocked their way back in. You used combination locks and they thought you were presenting them with a puzzle on another aptitude test.

They liked you. Fifteen or twenty of them adopted you. They slept with you, ate out of your plate and even tried to eat out of your mouth, all the time keeping up a running chatter on literature or science or anything

they thought might interest you.

They'd mess beside your plate or on your shoulder and try to change the subject when you screamed at them.

And so you shot them. You closed the doors and the windows and went around the house killing them until you found the last one poring over a book on advanced calculus and wetting on your pillow. And you shot him — only to discover it was a she and she had just tucked her new litter under the blankets, and the ten new Junies decided you were their mother.

Meanwhile, others had been looking in the windows. They liked this new game. They swiped a gun and figured out how it worked. They built smelters and factories and made guns small enough for them to carry. Then they came back and shot you.

That's why we were in trenches killing them. That's why they came in wave after wave killing us. And the only good thing about it was that so long as you could hold them back you could eat and not have them sitting in your plate. You could sleep without a dozen of them curled up against you for warmth.

Best of all, you could say something and not have it topped by a Juny, unless he got close enough to hear what you said, and then you could get him easy.

Sure it was hell. Like that Juny that came running toward me, his face wreathed in smiles, saying he had just invented an improved firing mechanism for our rifles he wanted to show me. I shot him, and snaked in the gun he had been carrying. And sure enough it had an improved firing mechanism. And I knew he had probably worked hours figuring it out, driven by a desire to have something to interest some human enough to buy a few minutes of companionship.

It was hell. You had to keep telling yourself they were vermin. But it was killing things smarter than you. It was killing friends who would do anything to gain your friendship, but couldn't accept the fact that you didn't want to wallow in their filth and be surrounded by them and pawed over every minute without letup.

It was as if they had a lack of integrity coupled with a determination to do what they wished to do regardless of you, coupled with a clinging personality. A caricature of the human soul.

We should have given up and evacuated the planet, but human beings aren't built that way. So for five years now we had been in this war of extermination, wanting to let go and run away, and knowing we never would.

And here I was, with a force of eight hundred men under my

command, surrounded by the Junies. We had to stick to the trench or we couldn't use our atom grenades. We had about two hundred grenades left. When they were gone, our tommy guns couldn't hold the Junies back for long.

What would happen then? Picture being the pet of a hundred or so Junies. No gun. No clothes. No way to escape them. No way to kill yourself. Believe me, burning bamboo slivers under your fingernails is something sane and solid and human by comparison. It leaves you with your self-respect intact.

A mud-coated figure lurched toward me along the trench, and I could tell by the eyes that glittered through the glue-coated features that it was bad news.

"Captain Summers," the kid gasped between breaths. "We got the radio going again. The whole front has retreated — all except us. That leaves us half a mile from our front, and —"

"And it might as well be a hundred miles," I said. "We couldn't get a hundred yards through this slippery muck. Did they say they're going to get to us?"

"They're bogged down all along this front. The goo. A truck can't go ten feet in it. The tires roll it up like carpeting until it jams."

I looked up at the low, unbroken cloud layer, and groaned. A plane couldn't possibly find us.

The mask of mud that was the

kid's face cracked into a grin. "Maybe the phantom truckdriver'll come to our rescue," he said. His grin vanished. "Sorry," he said uncomfortably. "I —"

"That's all right," I said mildly.

I watched him salute and turn away, staggering down the trench the way he had come, back to the radio dugout.

I took the grenade-counter out of my pocket. A neat little thing like a stopwatch, only it works by Gamma radiation. Its pointer showed we had just one hundred and twenty-seven atom grenades left — and even as I squinted at it in the bad light, the needle jumped a couple of times, synchronized with the echo-like sharp *bap* of grenades going off. Nice things, the atom grenades. They don't do any physical damage. It might break the windows if one exploded in a room. But a gust of wind could do that too.

All I know of how they're built is that they consist of an inner core the size of a small vitamin capsule and containing pure neutrons. The capsule is made of something that keeps them from escaping. Around this is cotton, then a thin spherical layer of fissionable material weighing two-and-a-half ounces. Non-radioactive. Then the aluminum covering. There's a small pin you shove in just before throwing the grenade. This pin breaks a small vial

of an acid that soaks across the cotton to the neutron capsule and eats it, releasing the neutrons. A bulletin I read says the neutrons are traveling at a speed of nine thousand feet a second when they are released. They hit the shell of fissionables, and instantly the whole shebang is nothing but Alpha, Beta, and Gamma radiation, and million-degree hot atoms. That's what makes the distinctive *bap*. A couple of feet of solid dirt will protect you against it. That's why the trench. In open field combat an atom grenade would be suicide if you were within a quarter of a mile of it.

The phantom truckdriver. That had been about six months ago at Lost Hope Ridge. The situation had been about the same as now, except that it wasn't due to radio trouble, but a sudden wave of Junies that kept us trapped in our trench while the rest of the front fell back.

At the last minute this truck came through with a load of supplies, mostly atom grenades. It saved the day. But afterwards it turned out that no truck had been dispatched to us, and the two thousand atom grenades he delivered had never been released to us and, to make it even more puzzling, had never existed.

You have to understand about atom grenades to know the significance of that. The counter

registers every grenade explosion. When it's over you have so many grenades left and so many explosions on the counter. They add up to the figure of grenades assigned to you. There's more chance of a bank having two thousand dollars too much at the end of the day than there is of having two thousand extra grenades.

It was the only one who had gotten a close-up look at the driver of the truck. I was shown the picture of every truckdriver in our sector, and he wasn't any of them.

The medics gave me two months away from the front, in a nice quiet place with gardens and clean sheets and leisurely meals, for which I was grateful. The story of the phantom truckdriver spread over the whole front, with my name tagged to it. You know how those things go. Hush-hush around me, but whisper-whisper and fingers pointing at me behind my back.

But, regardless of the medics, I *had* seen that phantom truckdriver.

The messenger from the radio dugout was coming along the trench again. When he got to me he reported, "They're sending a load of grenades to us. Five thousand. Welded some scrapers onto the truck body to peel off the goo on the tires."

"Good," I said. "How long do

they think it'll be before it gets here?"

"An hour. Unless it stalls."

I nodded. We'd know if it stalled. The driver would touch off his load to keep the Junies from getting it.

I watched the kid go back along the trench, pausing here and there to tell the men about the truck. I could see the mud-covered faces split into grins.

Would it get through? I stared into the curtain of rain, and so tricky is the imagination that I was sure I could see it out there, a vague shadow that seemed to come closer, stop, come on. . . . But it couldn't be. It would be at least another hour before it could arrive.

I started to turn away, then jerked my eyes back. It was definitely the truck. For an instant there had been clear vision for a hundred yards, and I saw the truck. I did some mental arithmetic. The messenger had taken maybe five minutes from the radio dugout. It could be that the truck had already started when the message came through. Also, the truck could be making much better time than they had hoped for—or they could have purposely said an hour so we wouldn't get our hopes too high and then too low if it didn't arrive in a shorter time.

I relaxed. It was the truck they had sent out. And it was close

enough now so that I could see it plainly. I passed the command down the trench to lay off the grenades and use fire power only. I sent word down the lines for five husky men to come forward for the unloading.

They were behind me as I climbed out of the trench and struggled to my feet, bringing heavy chunks of glue-mud with me. We went around to the back of the truck and dropped the tailgate. The men started unloading, passing the boxes of grenades from hand to hand to waiting hands in the trench. An occasional Juny bullet spattered against the truck, fired blindly from a distance.

I went around to the truck cab and opened the door, then froze. The driver was the same one. The phantom truckdriver.

"Hi," he greeted me casually. "I made it through."

He didn't remember me.

"Yes, you did," I said. I remained standing with my hand on the door, and looked at the right front tire. It was clean. There was no scraper welded to the frame to take off the layers of mud as they piled up. Instead, there was a fine spray of some liquid playing against the top of the tire from a nozzle.

"Come in out of the rain," the driver said casually.

"Guess I will," I said. I lifted a heavy mud-caked foot up to the

step and climbed in, sinking onto the seat beside him.

I slammed the door shut. I looked at the dashboard. Not because I expected to find anything different, but because I didn't want to look at the driver and give away the fact that I knew him.

My hair began to crawl under my sou'wester. At first glance the dashboard was regulation, but a dozen little things stood out after that. It was a hand-made dashboard, very well made, but unable to completely capture the details of the mass production stamp job.

I thought of that spray that kept the tires from fouling up. I thought of the Juny that had come running toward the trench with an improved rifle.

It was obvious now. This truck had been built by hand — by the Junies. That meant —

My head was spinning. The Junies were manufacturing atom grenades. They weren't using them on us. This was the second time they had brought me a truckload of grenades.

But who was this driver sitting beside me?

I studied him out of the corner of my eye. He wasn't looking at me. It occurred to me he hadn't looked directly at me at any time. He had kept his face straight ahead, as though he were just

relaxing. His hands were on the wheel.

He was husky. His chest was thick, his arms muscular. A theory entered my head and I tried to reject it. The driver couldn't be a robot. Or could he?

Maybe not a robot. Maybe an automaton with a Juny sitting in his chest running him.

"I'd better see how the unloading's coming," I said, opening the door.

His lips moved in a natural way, curving into a likeable smile. "Sure," he said.

I slid off the seat to the ground, looked at him again, then slammed the door.

The last of the grenade cases was being tossed into the trench. The truck was empty.

We closed the tailgate. I shouted to the driver. The motor roared, and the truck started up.

I wanted to run after it, to get back in the cab and see where it was going. I didn't. I dropped into the trench and watched the truck disappear into the drizzling rain.

The next few minutes were filled with grenade explosions as the Junies were stopped in their tracks. So many had been killed that emotions didn't connect with it. At least, not until now.

Now I watched the slaughter with a sense of horror, a feeling of insanity. They were manufacturing atom grenades to deliver to

us to use in killing them.

Aside from everything else, how had they discovered how to make them? It had taken human scientists over half a century from the first atom bomb to mass isolation and containment of pure neutrons. It had taken another half century to produce the atom grenade in its present form.

There was only one answer to that. Obviously some of the Junies had run across the information in our books. They had then duplicated every step, from locating ores to building neutron isolation plants.

The messenger from the radio dugout was coming along the trench toward me again. A shaft of sunlight struck him and those around him. I wasn't the only one who looked up at the break in the clouds. The eastern horizon was visible. The rainstorm would soon be over.

The kid grinned nervously when he reached me. "They're crazy back at base," he said. "They claim the truck they sent turned back before it reached us. When we told them it got through with the grenades they just sputtered."

"Let them sputter," I said. "Tell them if they rigged oil spray to coat the truck tires, they wouldn't pick up the mud. And tell them we were kidding about getting a truckload of grenades."

He started back toward the dugout.

"Wait a minute!" I called. He turned and came back.

I was thinking of the last time: Clean bedding, lawns, good meals with dishes and tablecloths. A hundred miles from the front.

"Tell them," I said slowly, "that the phantom truckdriver brought us three thousand grenades. Tell them I recognized him." I grinned at the kid. "Tell them I let him go because I knew he didn't exist. The medicos cured me of believing he existed. Tell them that. It's an order." I grinned. "Get with it, son."

His eyes were round bright marbles sticking in the mud that coated his face. "Yes, sir," he said, and was gone, stumbling through the muck of the trench.

Ten feet away I saw an arm go through the motion of throwing a grenade. It went off. I counted three and raised my head to look. Fifteen or twenty Junies lay sprawled in the mud. Dead. Their last expressions still on their little faces: pathetic, eager friendly expressions.

To them nothing had any meaning unless it contributed to social intercourse. The futile, impotent understanding of this was plain to me now.

They didn't understand we were waging a war of extermination against them, grim and ear-

nest. Such a thing would be incomprehensible to them, without meaning within their framework of nothing having meaning unless it furthered companionship.

They thought it was a game we were playing with them, like football or canasta. And they'd think that up to the end, when the last few hundred of them were surrounded and one last grenade would make their species extinct.

And that would happen, too. Man had landed on this planet and named it Juno, and he would never abandon this planet. Instead, he would make it over into the image of his desires. He would do so because he always had, and always would, wherever he went.



"The little darling! He says it's to be a surprise."

Anything else would be as inconceivable to him as — as the idea of wanting privacy would be to a Juny.

It stopped raining. Alpha Centauri, a little smaller than Earth's sun at this distance, would be setting in another two hours. I wondered if I would have to spend another night here.

NEVER GO BACK

(Continued from page 91)

At the doorway to Becker's room it leaned against the doorframe, gathering its rudimentary wits, while the counter-evolutionary process coursed with lightning speed through its tissues. Only one spark of reason burned: it must kill! It must plunge its daggerlike shears into the form that breathed on the bed before it.

It attempted to step forward, but during its long pause the lower appendages on its carcass

I hoped not. I wanted to get away from it to the sane atmosphere of the psychopathic ward, where there would be nothing but the neatly classified normal insanities.

Maybe if I told them the truth about the phantom truckdriver and stuck to my guns, they would keep me there.

had joined and now formed one solid extension of its trunk. It could no longer walk!

It fell, face forward.

The sound of its fall startled Becker into an upright position. He reached up and snapped on his light. At the foot of his bed something struggled and made moist, suckling sounds with its mouth. Becker looked down.

"My God!" he said. The thing that lay on the floor inched painfully toward him. It twisted and crawled. And twisted and crawled. And twisted . . .

THE COMMUTER

(Continued from page 151)

you remember your own son?"

"Of course," Paine murmured, annoyed. He followed Laura slowly into the bedroom. "Just for a minute everything seemed strange." He rubbed his forehead, frowning. "Strange and unfamiliar. Sort of out of focus."

They stood by the crib, gazing

down at the baby. Jimmy glared back up at his mother and dad.

"It must have been the sun," Laura said. "It's so terribly hot outside."

"That must be it. I'm okay now." Paine reached down and poked at the baby. He put his arm around his wife, hugging her to him. "It must have been the sun," he said. He looked down into her eyes and smiled.

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This took them several minutes. Then they became bored.

"Terribly primitive," she said.

"Yes, depressingly so. You noted their source of energy?" he asked.

"They assimilate each other, it would seem. They think of it as 'eating'."

"Not each other. They 'eat' animals."

"Well, what's the difference?"

"Are they pleased at being eaten? Is it a source of pleasure?"

"Very little, obviously. The animals seem happier, I'd say."

He was very bored now. "Oh, I don't know," he said.

They floated for a while on the wing of a jet plane, slightly dismayed by the clumsiness of its construction, and the inefficiency of its power source.

"It's probably the first refinement of the wheel," he said.

Then, rising a few thousand miles, they drifted beside saucer-shaped objects which, in design and function, were a slight improvement over the jet plane.

"These are from another planet," he said, slightly interested. He read the thoughts that emanated from the thinking matter within the saucer-shaped objects, and learned all about Martians.

"Terribly primitive," he said.

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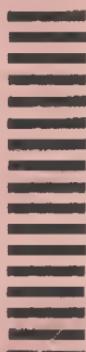
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